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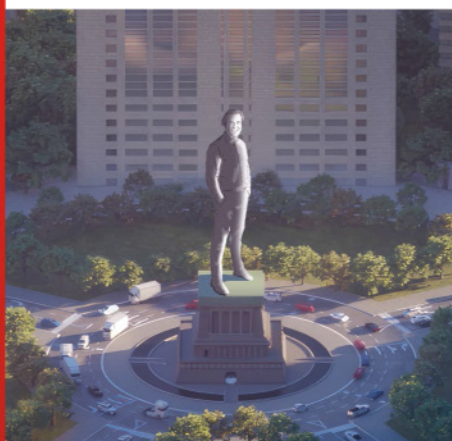
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"CITIES: SKYLINES II LOOKS LIKE A DREAM CITY-BUILDING SIM"



City-building simulators and PC gaming have always gone hand-in-hand. Since the classic *SimCity*, which launched back in 1989, there's been a plethora of sim games released on PC that, be it with a modern setting or one from ages past, have offered gamers the toolkit to make the metropolis of their dreams.

And now, in 2023, Colossal

Order is looking to take the genre to an entirely new level with *Cities: Skylines II*. It looks like a dream city-building sim, and you can read all about it in our authoritative cover feature starting on page 36 of this issue.

ROBERT JONES

Twitter
@rmicholasj

This month

Spent the entire issue's commissioning budget on a giant statue of himself to stand in front of PC Gamer Towers.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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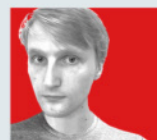
The PC Gamer team

**PHIL SAVAGE**

Twitter
@Octaeder

This month

Donned his trucking cap and chewed a huge stogie while delivering PC Gamer mags to Omicron Persei 8.

**JOSH WOLENS**

Twitter
@joshuawolens

This month

Dug too deep in the mines of Moria. Had to listen to a balrog's Beastie Boys mixtape. Word!

**ROBIN VALENTINE**

Twitter
@robinvalentine

This month

Brutally finished a console gamer foolsh enough to challenge him to fisticuffs.

**JACOB RIDLEY**

Twitter
@RidleyJG

This month

Did PC gaming on a bus. What?! But yes, it's true, thanks to flash new PC handhelds.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



A SPACE TODDYSSSEY

Why didn't Bethesda optimise **STARFIELD** for PC?

Bethesda's Todd Howard has been on the interview circuit for the launch of *Starfield*, and some of the questions have been doozies. An early highlight was an interview with Bloomberg Technology, where Bethesda's director was asked a stark and crowd-sourced question: why did you not optimise this game for PC?

"Uh... we did," says Howard, as Xbox head Phil Spencer fails to suppress a chuckle. "It's running great. It is a next-gen PC game, we really do push the technology, so

you may need to upgrade your PC for this game, but it's got a lot of great stuff going on in it and the fans are responding awesome."

He means people fans, not case fans. Howard does occasionally get a little spicy, such as when he was asked why the game has no vehicles and flatly pointed out "you do have

a vehicle, which is you obviously have your spaceship, you can go around in space. But then on the surface you do have a jetpack which you can upgrade".

I mean, fair point. One interviewer was slightly disappointed they'd landed on Earth in *Starfield*, and it wasn't the post-apocalyptic Earth of *Fallout*. "We talked about it," laughs Howard, adding that it was one of "hundreds" of ideas ultimately discarded. A sprawling, interstellar Bethesdaverse does sound kinda cool.

**"IT IS A NEXT-GEN
PC GAME, WE
REALLY DO PUSH
THE TECHNOLOGY"**

DOORFIELD MORE LIKE

This was a development with its fair

FREE WILL

THE SIMS SET FOR F2P



EA has revealed that *Project Rene*, the next game in *The Sims* franchise, will be “free to download” when it launches. Note that careful phrasing, which still leaves the game open to heavy monetisation. At least it’s already been confirmed we won’t have to deal with certain F2P baggage. Phew. ■RV

ROLLING WITH THE PUNCHES

STALKER 2 OFFICE FIRE



STALKER 2 seems to be cursed. First announced by Ukrainian developer GSC Game World in 2012, it suffered in development hell for years, and then was further delayed by the Russian invasion. The team moved to Prague, but just recently their new office was devastated by a fire. ■MT

DUMBBELL DESTRUCTION

BRUTAL BASKETS



Alas, *Skryim*’s basket glitch doesn’t work in *Starfield* – but this might be better. Apparently it’s entirely legal to bludgeon NPCs to death with physics objects and take their stuff. I tested this, and spent ten laborious minutes throwing a dumbbell at a UC officer. It worked, but at what cost? ■HR



ABOVE: Howard dropped the nugget that *Starfield* has “over three million words” while dodging a question about whether Bethesda will use AI in future.

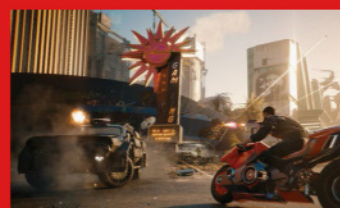
share of bumps. “Oh, we planned, and those plans went out the window,” said Howard. The game was once scheduled for a November 2022 release but Howard says the Covid-19 pandemic and working from home made the process “very, very slow”. The original date, “Had lots of buffer and we felt really good about it,” said Howard, “[But] as things moved on, we were off by a percentage, and a percentage when it comes to the scale of this game turns out to be a lot of time. We felt [the delay] was the right thing to do.” In a letter to staff, he added, “Development is never a straight road, it’s often a winding and treacherous path.”

Howard also talked about making a space game in the context of gaming history: many consider 1962’s *Spacewar!* to be the first videogame, while you don’t have to go too far to find someone who will tell you the original *Elite* is still the best game ever. *Starfield* now sits in that lineage, one of those games rooted in terra firma that reaches up and grasps for the stars.

“It’s something we always talked about here,” said Howard. “A few years in, we figured out why people try and stop or don’t want to do it all the way. But we are in a fortunate position to have the support and time to do it.” ■

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Cyberpunk 2.0

Cyberpunk 2077’s update 2.0 is a free patch that reworks huge chunks of the vanilla game.

Default controls

Armored Core 6 feels truly born for mouse and keyboard.

Skin deep

Turns out your abyssal tattoos in *Baldur’s Gate III* are full of in-jokes.

DisUnity

Unity announced surprise changes to its pricing model and has already executed a partial U-turn.

Diablol

A *Diablo IV* stats boffin played over 400 Nightmare dungeons, and the higher tiers aren’t worth it.

Red Flag

Assassin’s Creed 4: Black Flag was pulled from sale on Steam.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Tracking is in The Spy's blood. Be it stalking John Romero through Jekkad, the Dark Realm of daemons, for the latest intel on *SIGIL II*, or going undercover disguised as Hideo Kojima's pet bloodhound, Diamond, to sniff out *Death Stranding II* scoops, The Spy is always tracking PC gaming's biggest names.

Which is why, following a pleasant summer vacay to the charming rustic vineyard of Corvo Bianco in Toussaint, The Spy was well-positioned to track down and discover whispers circulating in the CD Projekt Red rumour mill that movement is well-and-truly afoot on *Project Polaris*, which is better known in the darker corners of the world as *The Witcher 4*.

But is the next entry in CD Projekt Red's foray into Andre Sapkowski's *Witcher* world indeed going to be called *The Witcher 4*? Well, earlier this year The Spy overheard CD Projekt's CEO Adam Kicinski directly refer to *Project Polaris* in this manner, stating that the firm "want to release three big *Witcher* games within six years, starting from the release of *Polaris*, which is *Witcher 4*".

That statement was quickly rowed back from, though, with CD Projekt Red proceeding to confirm to The Spy in a dimly lit underground car park in central Warsaw that Kicinski's comment "was actually a slip of the tongue. *Polaris* will be the first game in a new *Witcher* saga". The Polish studio's trenchcoat-wearing, cigarette-smoking operative then also added that, "we aim to release two more *Witcher* games after *Polaris*, creating a new AAA RPG trilogy". The Spy's read on this exchange was, yes, *Polaris* is the first game in a new trilogy of games set in Sapkowski's *Witcher* world but, no, it's not going to literally be called *The Witcher 4*. And it definitely won't be called *The Witcher 4: Gwentpocalypse Now*.

GOODBYE GERALT, CIAO CIRI?

Since then The Spy has tracked down a few more juicy nuggets of information regarding *Polaris*. Firstly, *Polaris* is going to be the first *Witcher* game from CD Projekt Red that uses Unreal Engine 5, a departure from the

firm's in-house REDengine. This will likely mean we won't see *Polaris* for a few years yet.

Secondly, The Spy overheard Kicinski say that, "After releasing *Phantom Liberty* we'll transfer a big part of the team to *Polaris*". Thirdly, and potentially far more revealing, is The Spy's confirmation – via watching CD Projekt Red's global community director Marcin Momot nod in approval vigorously when questioned about it – that the teaser image released by CD Projekt Red for its new *Witcher* trilogy of games does indeed show a Lynx medallion half buried in snow.

If this is true, that would place the timeframe of *Polaris* after that of the last trilogy of games' narrative, meaning that Geralt is enjoying a well-earned retirement and, taking

the good end to *Wild Hunt* as canon, Ciri becomes a *Witcher* herself. A new trilogy of *Witcher* games, then, with Ciri as the protagonist feels like a real possibility right now, but so too does one in which gamers get to play as another *Witcher* from the Lynx school entirely, potentially even one they create themselves. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY

The Spy refuses to picnic when visiting Toussaint unless a bottle of Corvo Bianco's finest is in the hamper.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



THE QUAKE CLUB

How to make an official **QUAKE 2 EXPANSION**... 25 years later

Wolfenstein: The New Order and New Colossus developer MachineGames obviously loves shooters. But even within the studio there's a circle of devs whose love transcends the norm: The Quake Club. This crew of creatives are responsible for fresh expansions bundled into the recent Nightdive remasters of Quake and now Quake 2. There's a long history here: for one of MachineGames' founders, Jerk Gustafsson, Quake 2 is linked to his career in game development.

"The whole reason I got into the industry at all – as for many, I'm sure, is Quake 1. I didn't even buy my first computer until 1996, when Quake 1 came out," he says. "I quite quickly realised that I could actually do something myself and be creative on my own when I started to see these maps being added to the internet."

By the time Quake 2 came out in late 1997, that enjoyable hobby had put Gustafsson on the path to a career in game development. "I decided I will just do one big thing for Quake 2, because at that time I'd already had some discussion about maybe joining Starbreeze up in northern Sweden," he said. "So I did one big Quake 2 thing, an episode called 1964 that I released that year. As soon as I did I went on to start my professional career at Starbreeze."

GOLDEN YEARS

When the remaster of Quake was out the door in 2021 and the Quake Club started talking about making an expansion for Quake 2 as well, the first thing Gustafsson did was try to find his old map. What had become of his last amateur effort? Laughing, he says, "I could only find it in a playthrough on YouTube. So I watched it, but then one of my previous colleagues that still works with us here at MachineGames today, he actually had it saved since the old Starbreeze days back in 1998." That ancient module became the basis for *Call of the Machine*, a brand new hub-and-spoke style campaign. Not that it resembles the old maps very much. As you can imagine, the 25 years since have seen Gustafsson and his team improve just a touch at game design.

"It's just horrible how bad it is," he says, laughing even more. Not that he's not proud of 1964 as a starting point – it's just so different from what he'd do today with much better tools and a proper team. Now, he has both.

One team member is Michael Hüll, a level designer who's famous for *Counter-Strike* map Mirage – Hüll was on the national Quake 2 team in Sweden, back in the day. "He was so excited to get to work on Quake 2," says Gustafsson. The whole team was, clearly, because it's a chance to get their names in the credits for a game that was so foundational for them. In making *Call of the*



The tools

TrenchBroom: The Quake 1 re-release used the original, ancient WorldCraft editor. *Call of the Machine* is made in TrenchBroom 2, a modern level designer capable of showing maps in 3D as you work on them.

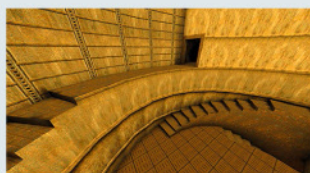
EricW-tools: A passionate Quake community member's tweaks add radiant, bouncing light, phong shading for polygons, ambient occlusion, and directional sunlight.



FAR LEFT: *Call of the Machine's* exterior spaces dwarf *Quake 2's*.

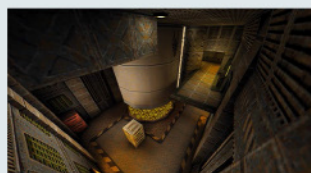
LEFT: These things scared me 20 years ago and now they scare me in HD.

THE NEW Q2 *A few subtle tech advances make a huge difference with minimal fuss*



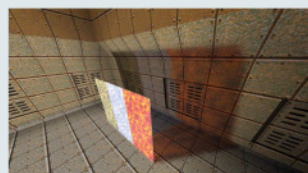
AMBIENT OCCLUSION

This technique adds depth to scenes by making corners and seams darker, because they get less light.



PHONG SHADING

Adjusts shading across low-poly surfaces to make them look rounded without adding more sides.



TRANSLUCENT SURFACES

Back in 1998 the big, fancy new thing in *Quake 2* was that it had more than one colour of light.



MUZZLE FLASHES

Sometimes you couldn't tell who was shooting at you in *Quake 2*. Here's that sorted.

Machine they wanted to stay true to what *Quake 2* was and still is. "But obviously we can do so much more," says Gustafsson.

A lot of that's just down to tools. The modder-developed TrenchBroom tool lets them create levels at a speed and complexity unimaginable to a solo mapmaker back in the '90s. You can quickly tell. The stages are multi-level monsters able to take advantage of large vertical spaces and cluttered environments – not to mention far greater numbers of enemies. One level, Ruined Earth, features urban infrastructure spaces more reminiscent of *Half-Life 2* than *Quake 2*.

Call of the Machine includes a hub level and 28 individual maps, each with the same objective: retrieve the disk. They didn't change up the winning formula of the great map packs of shooters past: Everybody split up, make a level, and be sure that the objective is getting a disk before you die. This time around it just leads to something a bit larger scale: the machine at the heart of the expansion is "a singularity capable of collapsing the fabric of reality".

"The younger guys are so extremely good at their craft," says Gustafsson. "I continue to just build stuff and then see what happens, really, but [they're] there just blocking it out, testing spaces, doing different layouts."

A QUAKE-OFF

The *Quake* Club grew in between *Quake* expansions, adding a few artists and visual designers. It was a huge

step up from the *Quake 1* re-release's expansion – made by Gustafsson solo in the original WorldCraft editor. The ease of using TrenchBroom and the EricW-tools let those designers bake their own levels from scratch. Gustafsson says that "a huge amount of cool ideas" came from that approach with minimal guidance from the rest of the team.

"Everybody can learn it, everybody can get into it," he says. New levels would then filter back into the *Quake* Club at large, soliciting feedback and getting critique. The big driving force behind the club is a guy – one of our lead level designers – named Andrew Yoder, who is extremely helpful with everything. He does a lot of these playthroughs where he plays through the entire episode and then comments on it while he plays. We have had some really nice events when at six in the afternoon everybody who is working on the map

sits there watching him play and listening to him."

A lot of Yoder's feedback kept *Call of the Machine* focused on *Quake*-era essentials like hiding secrets and making sure the maps were navigable without being too easy to figure out on the first try. That dedication to '90s authenticity makes it clear that *Call of the Machine* isn't the last thing the *Quake* Club will get up to.

"Myself, I haven't really stopped," Gustafsson says. "You know it's fun to build some stuff sometimes. It's like watching a movie at home. I can sit down and do some TrenchBroom stuff. It's just fun, you know, and relaxing." ■

Jon Bolding

CALL OF THE MACHINE INCLUDES A HUB LEVEL AND 28 INDIVIDUAL MAPS

VOCAL POINT

Voice, performance and casting director **KIRSTY GILLMORE** on voice direction in games

During and after university, Kirsty Gillmore studied – and had a passion for – drama; after university, she did both music and arts degrees.

A post grad in sound engineering, and then a move to the UK, followed. The rest of her storied career up until now could easily take up the whole page; but it includes directing actors and acting herself, work for the BBC, and setting up her own business. For nine years, this included directing, producing and writing other actors' voice reels. "Over the years that I did that," she explains, "I realised what I wanted to do was more directing."

Fast forward to 2023, and she's been involved in audio dramas, multiple animation projects (including for streaming giant Netflix) and, of course, several games. *Modern Warfare II*, *Baldur's Gate III*, and projects currently under NDA have benefitted from her talents.

A voice director's job is more complex than you might suspect. "To start with," says Gillmore, "the voice director is in charge of guiding the performance; basically working with the actor, and whoever's there from the client side, to create the best performance, the best realisation of the character. That involves interpreting the script. It involves providing context, and articulating the context in a way that is meaningful to the actor, and also gets across whatever the client wants for that particular character, that particular line."

"Some actors respond really well to emotional prompts. Some respond really well to physical prompts.

There's a lot of variation and in-between on that. I'm not there to say 'this is my vision, you will adhere to it'. It's more a collaboration between everybody who's involved; creating a performance is a collaborative process, as anybody who's worked in theatre and film will understand. In terms of the acting collaboration, it's no different from screen or stage."

DIRECT LINE

Many other considerations filter down to the voice director. Are they getting a sufficient number of words or lines per hour recorded? Has anything been poorly translated? Are there lines that work written down but not, it turns out, when spoken? Is

time being managed sufficiently to allow for the rest of the recording sessions that day? If the actor is difficult to direct, at what point do you call a stop to the session? What do you feed back, and who do you feed it back to? It's up to the voice director.

One reason Gillmore is able to get great performances out of actors that she works with, is that she remembers they are not tools; they are human beings. "[Another consideration is] complex or challenging material," she explains. "I'm directing and casting a game at the moment which has a lot of material about domestic abuse in it. Is the actor safe? Do they feel comfortable? Do I need to take a break, and let them go?"

"I did voice casting and direction for *Modern Warfare II*, so that was a lot of shouting, essentially! I'm thinking, how is their voice sounding? Do we need to take a break now – how much can we push it? Am I getting the best effective performance from them, do I think we need to go down and do fewer takes per line? Do I need to feed back to the client that [the day's workload] is potentially unrealistic?"

Something unique to games, and something that Gillmore regularly had to deal with while directing actors for *Baldur's Gate III*, is the potential for several contexts for the same scene. "Potentially your brother died; potentially he was rescued. Potentially you decided to leave the group of rebels you were with, potentially you didn't – we're going to do all those options. It's a lot! I'm not saying that happens with every single game, but those are the things I have to consider while I'm doing it, because that is my responsibility." ■

Luke Kemp

VOX POPULAR

Some of gaming's best performances



GUYBRUSH THREEPWOOD
Dominic Armato's consistently fantastic performance shines as bright as a fine leather jacket.



CHLOE PRICE
Picking one Ashly Burch performance is absurd, but her turn in *Life is Strange* was great.



JOKER
One of the finest interpretations of Joker known to man, thanks to Mark Hamill.



PETER PARKER/SPIDER-MAN
Yuri Lowenthal delivers one of his best performances.



A VOICE DIRECTOR'S JOB IS MORE COMPLEX THAN YOU MIGHT SUSPECT

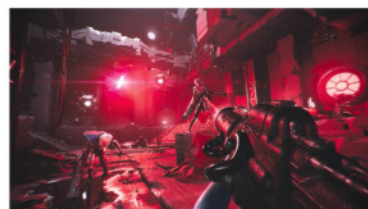


A game called *Baldur's Gate III* is on Gillmore's CV, maybe you've heard of it?

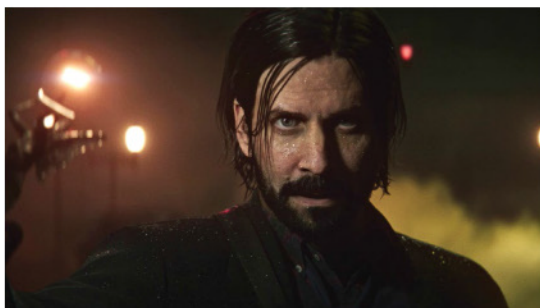


ABOVE: Tempting as it was to ask Gillmore if she met Ghost, I somehow resisted.

LEFT: Played *Live A Live*? You've heard the fruits of Kirsty's labour there.



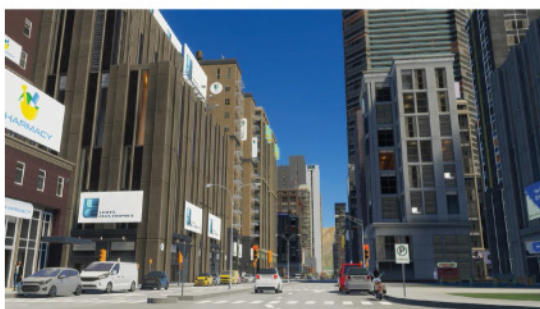
1 month



ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASE October 17, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Remedy Entertainment

The long-awaited sequel promises more survival and psychological horrors, rejoining the story 13 years after Alan Wake went missing.



CITIES: SKYLINES II

RELEASE October 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Colossal Order Ltd

The much-anticipated sequel to arguably the best city-building sandbox ever created arrives in late October. Create a thriving metropolis from the ground up.

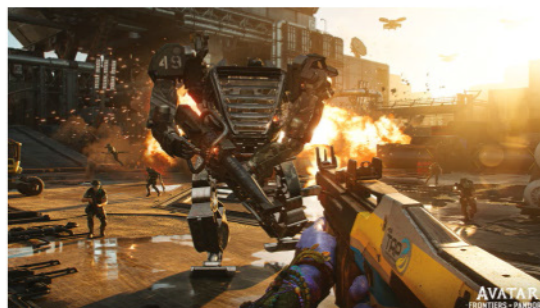


LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN

RELEASE November 8, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

Just when he thought he was out of the yakuza life, Kazuma Kiryu is dragged back into conflict by a mysterious figure. Hot new action JRPG incoming.

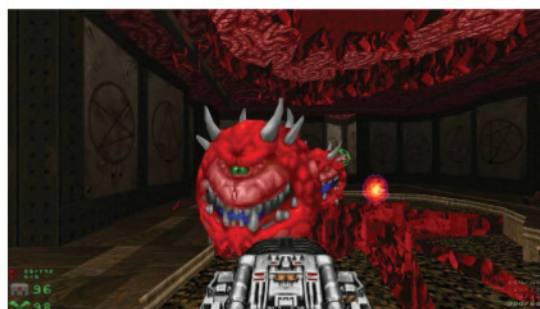
3 months



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

RELEASE December 7, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

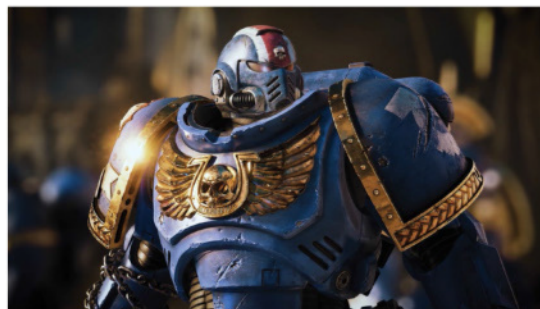
With *Far Cry*-style first person combat as well as third-person adventuring and beast-riding, this open-world action adventure is going big.



SIGIL II

RELEASE December 10, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Romero Games

John Romero returns with a follow-up to his 2019 original *Doom* expansion, *SIGIL*. Expect a new campaign with even more ingeniously designed levels.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE Winter 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and thunder hammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more. Action-packed sequel incoming winter 2023.

6 months



PALWORLD

RELEASE January, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Pocketpair

A multiplayer, open-world survival crafting game where gamers befriend and collect mysterious creatures called Pal. Yes, it's *Pokémon* for PC gamers!



HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE February, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS.



SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE February 2, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

After a one-year release date slip, the action-adventure third-person shooter is set to deliver co-op cape-killing capers. Can the *Batman: Arkham* studio deliver?

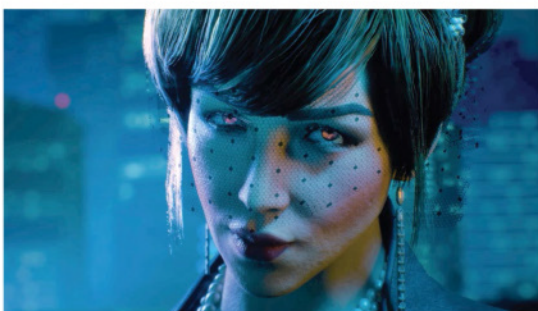
12 months+



ARK 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Studio Wildcard

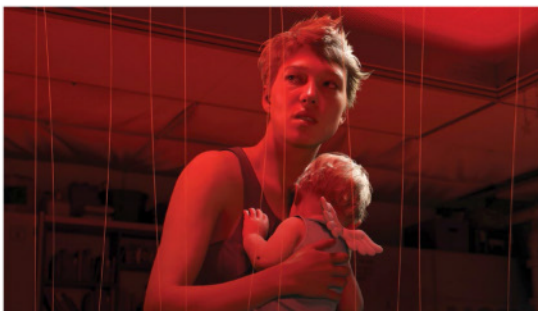
The *Ark* series returns with Vin Diesel-voiced hero Santiago attempting to protect his daughter, Meeka, while surviving in a world dominated by dinosaurs.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room, and there's even a trailer.



DEATH STRANDING 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Kojima Productions

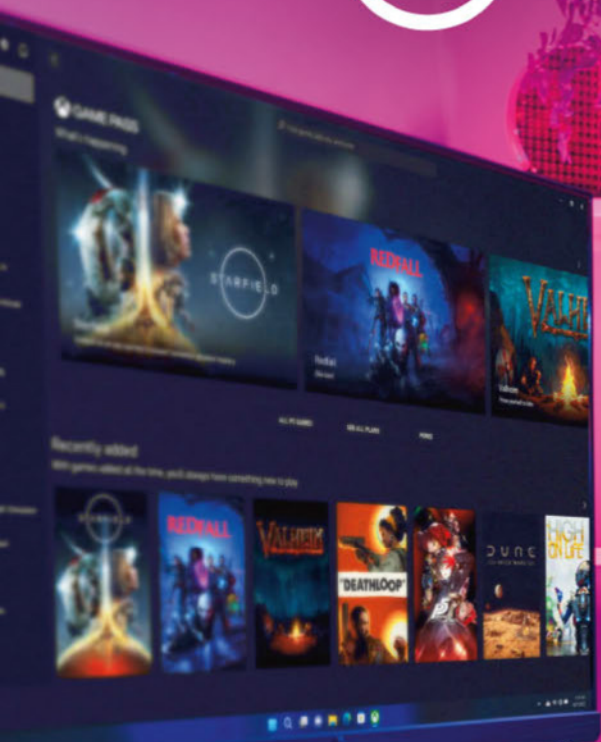
The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

MODDED

DLSS STARFIELD

It's fair to say that *Starfield* is missing a lot of graphical settings that we've come to expect in a modern AAA PC game release, including an aspect ratio slider, support for 32:9 ultrawide monitor resolutions, and even DLSS and XeSS support. Well, luckily, if you have an Nvidia or Intel graphics card, you can now add DLSS and XeSS into your game thanks to an excellent mod from PureDark over at Nexus Mods. You can grab the mod right now: shorturl.at/AFLV4





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PRE-BUILT SYSTEM



PREVIEW

Life By You



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

5 March, 2024

DEVELOPER

Paradox Tectonic

PUBLISHER

Paradox Interactive

LINK

shorturl.at/eoFT8

LIFE BY YOU

PLAYED
IT

Welcome to *The Sims*
but with its brake lines cut

I'm not sure anything has ever made as much sense to me as the fact that Rod Humble – studio head of *Life by You* maker Paradox Tectonic – used to work high-up on both *The Sims* and *Second Life*. Watching the game in motion in a demo at this year's Gamescom, how could it be otherwise? The game looks like a strange, ungainly, but undeniably intriguing mixture of both: part life sim, part modders' toolkit, part chaos generation engine.

Where *The Sims* has been polished to a (relative) mirror sheen over the course of four main games, two decades of development, and a number of expansions only rivalled by, well, Paradox games, *Life by You* is an ambitious and slightly ramshackle-looking thing. At times, it threatens to spill over into calamity as the game's wheels begin to pull clear of the tracks, but gosh, doesn't that have an allure all its own?

YOGA INSTRUCTOR

Watching Paradox director of marketing King Choi take me through a day in the life of yoga instructor Ronnie Maisonet, I almost feel like I'm witnessing a demo for a storytelling toolkit rather than a game in the vein of *The Sims*.

Everything is set up for players to dig their hands in and start mucking around. Right from the jump, Ronnie's character is freely and seemingly

**I ALMOST FEEL LIKE I'M
WITNESSING A DEMO FOR A
STORYTELLING TOOLKIT**





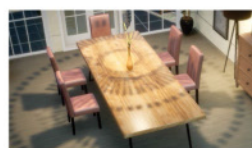
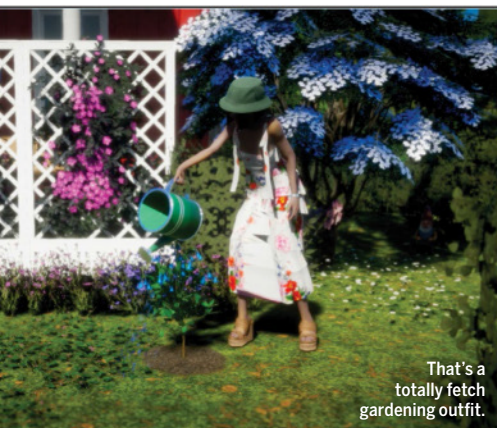
PREVIEW

Life By You

RIGHT: Naturally, the character customisation options are plentiful.

BELOW: Dave got drunk and scanned and printed pictures of his backside.





☞ constantly editable. You can reach in whenever you want and start rearranging the building blocks. New genders and sexualities are a checkbox away, with more to come down the line as Paradox works with consultants to ensure the full spectrum of human experience is represented.

LIFE BY YOU, REALLY

That philosophy extends outwards from there. A chat at work with Ronnie's colleague, which takes place in English rather than some kind of pidgin-Simlish, can likewise be edited just by tapping a pencil icon next to each dialogue choice. After deciding (bravely) to create a toxic environment at work and choosing to aggravate his coworker, Choi is presented with a few different speech options to pick from.

Each of them should have the same effect – annoying Ronnie's colleague – but they're all a different flavour of mean. Don't like them? Write your own. It doesn't sound like *Life by You* will adapt on the fly to what you write, but it's all part and parcel of the game's principle of letting players mess with its fundamentals. This is a game that throws up an editable colour hex code whenever you pick a new thing to build and where you can throw pretty much any item into an object editor to start tinkering with its properties. The *Second Life* spirit bleeds through. It really wants you to get in there and make its simulation your own.

I should also mention that, for reasons no one in the demo could fathom, this entire conversation happened under the watchful eye of a random, bedraggled onlooker who spent the entire time standing unblinking behind Ronnie's shoulder. I got the impression this hadn't happened to Choi before, but also that things just like it occurred with alarming regularity. Frankly, I find it charming.

TELLING TALES

That doesn't mean the whole game is relying on you to make it move, mind you. During my demo, Choi talked up *Life by You's* "emergent gameplay"

engine, the network of connections underpinning the game's interactions that makes for all sorts of wacky happenstance and strange stories. Choi told me the game is trying to take the context of events into account as much as possible, meaning the exact same action or dialogue choice could have different outcomes depending on their who, what, where and why.

By way of example, Choi described giving a similar demo in which he once again decided to try to pick a fight with a coworker. In that instance, though, his character and their coworker had a few flirtatious interactions while he wasn't looking. That pre-existing relationship, combined with the unique assemblage of personal traits that coworker had, meant that when he tried to say something mean to them they just took it as playful ribbing. Their affection meter climbed, the flirtatious relationship deepened, and Choi was left slightly bemused by what he'd just witnessed happening.

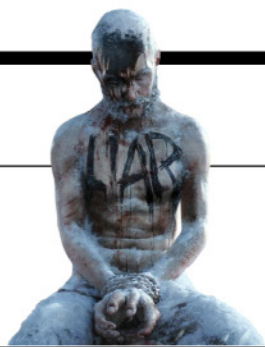
Consider me very curious to see how that plays out when the game hits stores. *Life by You* seems intensely detail-oriented. Discarded clothes pile up on the floor when characters take them off, and when Ronnie took a moment on the way home from work to pick the flowers outside her door, she was later able to arrange them – those specific flowers – into a vase on her kitchen counter. When I asked about it, it sounded like *Life by You* is churning with variables like that (many of which you can get in and flick around yourself), and I'm frankly intrigued by the potential number of things for its context-sensitive systems to take into account.

I'm a bit worried too, though. *Life by You* already looks a bit like a *Second Life* mod that broke free of containment, and I wonder if it might break down beneath the weight of all that emergent ambition. Or even the reverse: perhaps all that extraneous detail never really plays into the proceedings of your average game, leaving it feeling like a missed opportunity. But Choi told me Paradox is working very closely with the modding community to make sure it has everything it needs to turn the game inside out when it finally hits early access – where it'll likely stay for around a year, says Choi – on March 5, 2024. If those details don't matter then, it's only a matter of time until they do.

Joshua Wolens

IT REALLY WANTS YOU TO GET IN THERE AND MAKE ITS SIMULATION YOUR OWN

Frostpunk 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024DEVELOPER
11-bit StudiosPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
frostpunk2.com

FROSTPUNK 2

You've survived. Now enjoy some even bigger problems

Congratulations, you have survived the end of the world. Set 30 years after the original game, *Frostpunk 2* puts you in charge of a city no longer battling for its very life. Sure, the world outside is still frozen and harsh. It's still possible to die of hunger and lack of resources, but the worst is over. So what now?

That's the question at the heart of the sequel. It's not a case of can you survive. Instead, now that you have survived, what do you want your future to be?

I get to see part of a playthrough of *Frostpunk 2*'s sandbox mode, called Utopia Builder. During campaign creation, in addition to the standard city builder customisation options, you also pick two communities who will make up the population of your city. For this demo, the developers pick the Engineers and the Foragers. The Engineers are the descendants of the people who built the generator cities. Their belief is that human ingenuity is what led to their survival. The Foragers, meanwhile, bore the brunt of the Frostlands with just their will to survive.

The city you start with at the beginning of a campaign is roughly the size of what you might end with in the original game. Rather than placing each individual building, here you're planning out whole districts for expansion, and placing important buildings within them to act as modifiers or unlock important systems.

The Research Institute building, for instance, is *Frostpunk 2*'s version of a tech

FIRST
LOOK

tree. But rather than simply select new options from a list, it builds off the tension between your city's communities. Each option takes the form of a question – a problem in need of a solution. In the demo, the developers select a question, "How do we produce more food?" and are given suggestions from the two factions. The Foragers want to use human waste as fertiliser. We agree, but the Engineers aren't happy. They ask that the city at least treats the sewage first. When dysentery breaks out, it seems they were probably right.

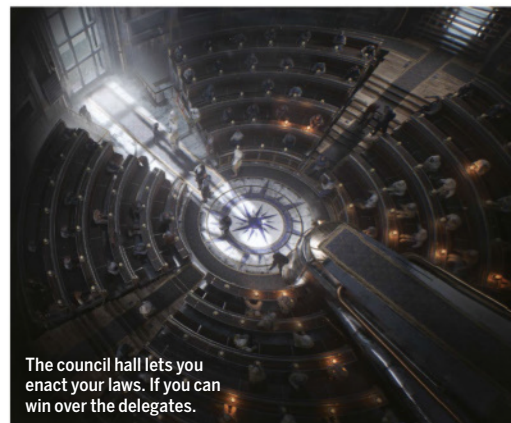
HOT MOD

Perhaps the most important new building is the Council Hall, where delegates from the factions bring ideas and vote on the laws you want to enact. A disagreement has formed on the role of children in this new society. The Engineers, naturally, think they should be sent to school. The Foragers, meanwhile, believe raising children should be entirely down to the desires of the parents. You can propose a law, but with a 50/50 split on the council it will be a coin toss which way that vote would go. You can also choose to negotiate – the Engineers may want you to pursue a problem in the Research Institute's idea tree, and be willing to vote your way if you agree.

The real twist of *Frostpunk 2*'s new scope is revealed when the developers skip forward two years into the same playthrough. New factions have emerged – extreme offshoots of the original communities. The Iceblooms are an extremist take on the Forager ideology, who believe that if you're not fit enough to survive then fine, you should die. The Technocrats, meanwhile, have taken the Engineer's predilection for science and reason to a horrifying conclusion, arguing that data driven choices should decide all of society's choices, including who should marry, how many children and so on. While both factions are small for now, it's clear their influence is growing.

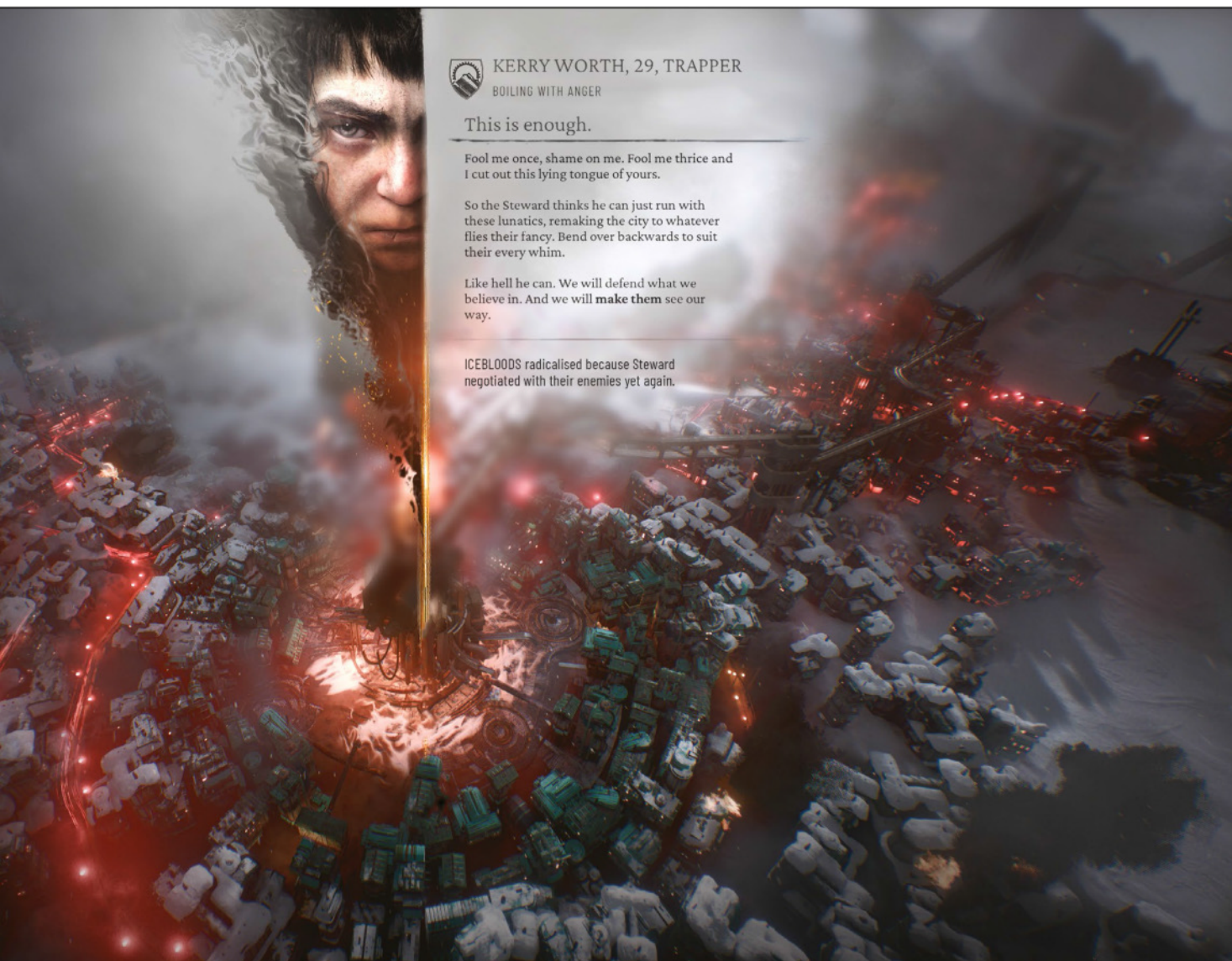
It's a fascinating change of direction. *Frostpunk 2* is now a game about divergent ambition; about the point at which ideas become so strong they lose sight of the people they're applied to. Survival almost feels small in comparison.

Phil Savage



The council hall lets you enact your laws. If you can win over the delegates.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SURVIVED, WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR FUTURE TO BE?



KERRY WORTH, 29, TRAPPER
BOILING WITH ANGER

This is enough.

Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me thrice and I cut out this lying tongue of yours.

So the Steward thinks he can just run with these lunatics, remaking the city to whatever flies their fancy. Bend over backwards to suit their every whim.

Like hell he can. We will defend what we believe in. And we will **make them** see our way.

ICEBLOODS radicalised because Steward negotiated with their enemies yet again.



ABOVE: As more extreme factions rise, tensions are higher than ever.

LEFT: The city expands. Don't lose sight of the people that live in it.

PREVIEW

Star Trucker



ABOVE: It's a trucking game, but in space.

RIGHT: Paths of curving gates are your space 'roads'.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024DEVELOPER
Monster and MonsterPUBLISHER
Raw FuryLINK
shorturl.at/cehn8

STAR TRUCKER

Explore the open roads
of space while driving a truck

I'm not going to claim *Star Trucker* was the best thing I saw at Gamescom, per se, but I did come away from my hands-on demo thinking: yes, I understand exactly what this is, and I would like to play more of it. It's a trucking game, but in space. That's it. That's the pitch.

In the announcement trailer you get a feel for the vibe: diners, country music, CB radios – a nod to the mythologised trucking culture of the '70s. That it's all happening in deep space means it would be very easy for *Star Trucker* to lean into the comedy of the conceit, but as far as I can tell, that's not what's happening here. Sure, the conversations on your CB radio seem lighthearted in tone, but otherwise it's played straight.

Hauling my cargo, it's clear just how many cues *Star Trucker* is taking from the peerless *Euro Truck Simulator 2* – everything from the deadline to get your cargo transported on time, to the unlockable perks that let you take on more intensive, high-paying jobs. You even need to reverse your truck into the space station's dock, a tricky bit of manoeuvring that reminded me of every time in *ETS2* that I tried to reverse into a tight parking spot in Düsseldorf to unload my cargo.

The major difference, of course, is that there are no roads in space. Warping into a new system to head to the nearby space station, though, I see a couple of options. I can follow the space highway – a curving path of floating gates that guide me neatly

to my destination. Or I can put the space station in my windshield and take the direct path. It's the quicker route, but the marked path has been cleared of any space debris. Going off-road could mean a nasty collision with some space rocks.

Any damage you sustain while out on your travels will need to be fixed up. Unlike in *ETS2*, where there are actual businesses to do that work for you, *Star Trucker* takes a more DIY approach. Here you can leave your seat, climb into a space suit and float around the exterior of your truck searching for holes to patch up yourself. It's a neat little interaction that does a good job of selling the base fantasy of any trucking game – you, alone with your vehicle, working towards your destination whatever the cost. It doesn't matter if it's the backroads of Helsinki or the outer reaches of the solar system, the pleasure is the same.

HAUL, TRADE, HONK

I like how tactile your truck feels. It's not just the relationship you form as you fix it over a long-haul flight, but all the other ways you interact with it too. There's a lever for unhooking your cargo, a radio you can turn on and off, and the receiver for your CB radio that you can hold to select branching dialogue options. You can even leave your seat and explore your cab – using the space to store any smaller items you might find on your way, which can be traded the next time you visit a space station.

In addition to the more legal options, you may also come across contraband on your travels, and may have to reroute your journey through the less regulated systems. The developer says there'll be around 30 systems to visit in the game – a number picked because it means there are more interesting routes to your destination, including one-way systems that you'll need to plan around.

The demo itself was short – make some repairs, unload some cargo, dock at a station – so I walked away wanting more. I'm interested to see how big each destination is, and how much might be lurking away in the quieter parts of space. Broadly, though, I'm looking forward to a more accessible, interesting take on the truck sim fantasy.

Phil Savage

PLAYED
IT

**GOING OFF-ROAD COULD
MEAN A NASTY COLLISION
WITH SOME SPACE ROCKS**

Dungeons of Hinterberg

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2024

DEVELOPER
Microbird Games

PUBLISHER
Curve Games

LINK
dungeonsofhinterberg.com

DUNGEONS OF HINTERBERG

Finding yourself in the Austrian Alps, what could be better?

We've all been burned by the corporate life. The daily rigmarole can certainly take its toll. That's where we find trainee lawyer Luisa in *Dungeons of Hinterberg*, who ventures to the Austrian region to solve puzzles, master magic, slay monsters and even enjoy a coffee with friends by the lake.

Amidst Gamescom 2023 in Cologne, Germany, I had a 30-minute hands-on with *Dungeons of Hinterberg*, quickly enamoured by its charm. The singleplayer experience juxtaposes its fast-paced action with mellow moments to great effect, driving its lead character to be more than just another avatar.

Starting in the Alpine hills, the vivid colours displayed from mountain tops are nothing short of stunning. While this area was certainly designed as the action-loading part, I took several moments to take in the pastel shades that kissed the heavens. It felt a shame in some ways to enter combat in such serene surroundings, yet it wasn't long before I was tearing apart a crowd of little monsters without a second thought. Only in a videogame.

HACK-AND-SLASH

Combat is a mixture of traditional hack-and-slash along with a handful of special abilities and magic skills to unleash upon anyone looking to ruin Luisa's vacation. Not on my watch! Dodging is another tactic which will need to be enforced frequently, especially as

you come up against larger enemies that like to charge or shoot out ranged attacks. What I like is that it's fast, fluid and can be understood in minutes.

One of the best aspects is the sense of adventure that comes from dungeon exploration. Usually dark and gloomy, this one was bright and vibrant with gemstones hanging from every surrounding, in some ways lighting a path down the claustrophobic crevice. Treasures can be found yes, but it's the sudden speed kick from riding a minecart through the deep tunnels that made this section most memorable. The animation alone really takes this to another level. While I only got a chance to venture down one dungeon, it definitely had enough of a pull that I'm intrigued to see what the full release entails.

Two powers are available at any time to help solve puzzles: a grapple-like ability as well as a bomb that can explode when prompted. One example features a boulder blocking the path ahead. What's needed is for the bomb to be placed onto a scale before counteracting that weight by using the grapple hook, only to time the explosion in the right position to clear the obstruction. It was relatively simple, like the other puzzles I encountered. If anything, there was potential for a lack of challenge that hopefully will surface further on.

Quickly fast-forwarded to the city of Hinterberg (inspired by Hallstatt, a small town found in the district of Gmunden, Austria), Luisa spends her evenings getting to know the locals and building relationships – doing so will increase battle powers during the daytime. It's also a cool way of making both gameplay elements equally important.

Hinterberg is split into multiple sectors, requiring a quick load to jump between each part, although it does its best to feel like a coherent city. The number of NPCs walking the bustling streets (30? 40? 50? I lost count) plus the dialogue for those that could be interacted with all contribute to the city feeling lived in. It's clear that conversation is at the heart of *Dungeons of Hinterberg*, pushing forward not only the story but also how well the action plays out. That's a conversation I want to be a part of come 2024.

Matt Poskitt



TRADITIONAL HACK-AND-SLASH COMBAT ALONG WITH A HANDFUL OF SPECIAL ABILITIES



ABOVE: The Austrian Alps and beyond.

LEFT: A variety of special attacks and magic will also feature.



PREVIEW

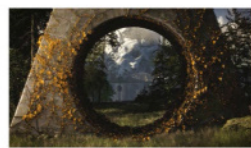
The Talos Principle 2



ABOVE: Metal meets stone.

RIGHT: The driller makes holes to reach unreachable spaces.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023DEVELOPER
CroteamPUBLISHER
Devolver DigitalLINK
thetalosprinciple.com

THE TALOS PRINCIPLE 2

More puzzles, more philosophy, and another tantalising mystery

One of the best of the many first-person puzzlers that followed in *Portal*'s wake, *The Talos Principle* offered what felt like a complete experience. The possibility space of its puzzles was thoroughly explored. And its story, in part explored through text prompt conversations with a nihilistic contrarian, was complete. Where's even left to go?

In *The Talos Principle 2*, the answer is far into the future. My hands-off demo starts with a short boot-up sequence that mimics the style, architecture and puzzles of the original game. It's after this that *The Talos Principle 2* reveals itself. You are born into the world – the 1,000th robotic citizen of the city of New Jerusalem, and, according to the rules of their society, also the last. In an effort to avoid the mistakes of the past, the robots strive for ecological austerity. 1,000 people. That's their lot.

For some, your character's birth is a cause of celebration – the end of their expansion and the beginning of the final form of their society. For others, it's a bitter pill. The city is struggling for the resources they need to build and repair, causing some to argue for continued growth and further exploitation of the land. These are the stakes for *The Talos Principle 2*. If the first game was about what it means to be an individual, the sequel asks what that means for the society that individuals form.

It is, of course, still about puzzles too. As the robots gather to celebrate the

arrival of the last member of their tribe, they're interrupted by a stream of swirling purple particles that coalesce into a godlike figure that calls himself Prometheus. He invites everyone to his island, before being interrupted by an unseen figure called Pandora.

THE ISLAND

Eventually, you set off with a team to visit the island, and discover the giant pyramid at its centre. Getting inside requires exploring the island and the puzzles it contains. The tools of *The Talos Principle 2*'s puzzles are similar to those of the first game, but with a twist of extra complexity. Instead of a connector to redirect lasers around an environment, for instance, here I see an RGB converter that changes the colour of the lasers.

In one puzzle, we need to hook up a red laser to the matching receiver in order to deactivate an energy wall. Only, the laser is nowhere near where it needs to be. To solve it, we hook the red laser up to a nearby blue laser to create a green one, and shoot that off towards a nearby blue laser, where, using a second RGB converter, we can output another red beam and redirect it.

Other tools include a driller that forms holes in walls, a teleportation pad that you can warp to, and an activator that projects a spherical aura that turns on any device within it. Puzzles may also contain empty robot shells that you're able to mind transfer into, essentially co-operating with yourself to find a solution. It's a fun-looking suite of new options that should offer plenty of challenge as the various tools are combined together in complex ways.

The Talos Principle didn't need a sequel, but I can't fault the ambition on display here. It's a smart progression: moving from a self-reflective mystery to one that has implications for a larger society, where you're working with an actual team in pursuit of a common goal. And the demo did enough to have me intrigued about its mystery – the giant megastructure that I want to see inside. I can't say for sure if the puzzle tools will do enough to make the puzzling feel meaningfully different, but I'm looking forward to figuring out the answers.

Phil Savage

FIRST
LOOKPrometheus
in chains.

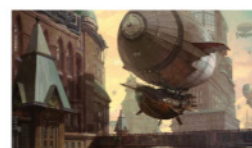
GETTING INSIDE REQUIRES EXPLORING THE ISLAND AND THE PUZZLES IT CONTAINS



ABOVE: Supply chains are key to building anything in Millennia.

RIGHT: There are various ages in Millennia, but which one you progress to each time can vary.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
C PromptPUBLISHER
Paradox InteractiveLINK
shorturl.at/IK135

MILLENNIA

A new 4X with Paradox's backing, but is this *Civ*-like too *Civ*-like?

History is littered with defeated *Civilization*-likes, from *Humankind* to *GalCiv 4*. Try as they might, no one's knocked old Sid Meier off his perch just yet, even six games in and 27 years on. But that doesn't mean devs will stop trying. Enter *Millennia*, a new 4X strategy game from C Prompt published by Paradox Interactive.

For big chunks of *Millennia*'s demo, I didn't necessarily need the tutorial tips. On a micro level, plenty of what you'll find works just like it does in *Civ*. You've got your cities, your settlers, your major competitors and the minor, single-city bit-players you're competing for influence over. You'll fend off barbarians and rush for space and resources in the early game, send scouts to explore the frontier, and set workers to improve the resource tiles that surround your cities.

That's not to say everything feels like *Civ*. Combat feels a bit more involved, with step-by-step breakdowns of battles cropping up after you conclude them so you can delve into the detail of how you won or lost your fights. Plus, *Millennia* has done the smart thing and taken one of the best parts of its fellow *Civ*-like *Old World*. If you don't like a move you just made, you can click the undo button to roll it back. That means you can see exactly how you lost a fight before rolling back a ways to try to rectify your mistake.

C Prompt told me that, since the devs know players are going to save scum their

way around mistakes anyway, it made sense to just make it a part of the actual game. When I launched an ill-fated attack against a Roman city, I was able to roll it back as if nothing had happened.

NEW AGE MOVEMENT

It's on the macro level that *Millennia*'s unique ambitions and ideas come to the fore. In my demo, C Prompt set me up in early Japan. I had one city which had been mismanaged to the point that it had become a cesspit. Although its various other scores were in the green, sanitation was way low, leading to potentially dire consequences for public health and, in fact, the entire course of history.

Where other historical strategy games progress more-or-less linearly down a predetermined historical path, *Millennia* gets weird with it. You still progress from one age to the next, bringing about all sorts of cultural, technological and political developments – you'll be able to adopt ideologies like communism or capitalism later in the game, and to accept or reject religion – but it's not guaranteed which one you'll be moving to. Because my only city was in the grip of a sustained public health crisis, it was looking incredibly likely that I was about to move into the Age of Plague rather than any of the other potential, much nicer sounding eras.

Its economic simulation sounds more robust than that of many of its peers, too. I spent most of my time with the game pummeling uselessly on the walls of the Roman Empire, so I didn't get too deep into it, but C Prompt was keen to talk up the supply chains that would go into your production of goods. Making books requires making paper, which requires felling trees, and figuring out where to focus your attention sounds like it will come with a fair bit of opportunity cost.

That's the tension of a demo, I suppose. I think that if *Millennia* truly does something major and innovative to that *Civ*-like 4X formula we all know, it will play out in the long term, over the course of a bunch of broader, more macro-level decisions that eventually cohere into an experience that doesn't feel so strikingly familiar. But based on what I've seen? I'm feeling more than a little *deja vu*.

Joshua Wolens

ITS ECONOMIC SIMULATION
SOUNDS MORE ROBUST THAN
THAT OF MANY OF ITS PEERS





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Cities: Skylines II

CITY

Six years in the making, **CITIES: SKYLINES II** hopes to keep you building for the next decade

By Rick Lane



SLICKER

The moment *Cities: Skylines II* clicked for me was when I unlocked farms. One of several specialist industries included in the city-building sequel, farms produce a variety of crops and livestock from a circular outline around the central farming structure. Because of this, each farm occupies a large expanse of land, giving these areas a very different vibe from your dense and bustling town centre.

In the first *Skylines*, having a small number of buildings occupy so much space would have been impractical. But *Skylines II* is built to accommodate more dispersed, low density settlements. “When you are building the city, you don’t necessarily have to think about a huge city, you can actually have these more rural spaces,” says Mariina Hallikainen, CEO of developer Colossal Order. “It’s completely up to you how you want to go about building the city and what your story for the city is.”

That’s the key difference between *Skylines II* and its predecessor. Whereas the original was about building a city, *Skylines II* is about building your city. How it looks. How it functions. How it makes money. *Skylines II* has been built from the ground up to let you build not just a big city, but a specific one.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

A game of *Skylines II* starts out in familiar fashion. You pick your map, lay down a few roads, and assign the areas either side of these roads to three starting zone types – residential, commercial and industrial. Connect your power and water supplies, and soon you’ll see cranes pop up across your fledgling settlement. Before long, you’ll have rows of picturesque houses in your residential area, local businesses in your commercial zones and smoke-belching factories in your industrial areas.

There are some apparent differences at this early stage. Water pipes and electrical cables are now laid as part of the road network, thereby alleviating much of the faff surrounding these basic amenities. You can also lay electrical cables underground, so your city isn’t crawling with unsightly metal pylons. And of course, it all looks much prettier than the first game, with more natural lighting and volumetric smoke wafting from chimney stacks.

town with row houses and bricks,” Hallikainen says. “And then newer suburbia, for example, that has the American-style building. We want to offer the player as much control and variation as possible.”

Further differences become apparent once your city starts to expand. One of the most notable changes to how *Skylines II* works is that city milestones are no longer judged by population. Instead, city progression is tracked through Expansion Points. These are accrued by laying down roads and new zones, but they also build up passively simply by having a city that works. The point of this change is to decouple progression from pure growth. “You can have a city of just a few thousand citizens, or a town, and basically create something that works and the citizens are happy,” Hallikainen explains.

By far the most notable difference, however, is one that you choose yourself – your city’s theme. *Skylines II* lets you pick between American or European themes your for your settlement, with each dramatically affecting the architecture, signage, road networks and vehicle types you’ll see around the city. You can also switch between the two themes at any time, building different parts of your city with contrasting architectural styles (although your road network will remain consistent with its initial format) “You could build a European

The rewards for reaching a new milestone are different as well. In the first *Skylines*, each new milestone automatically unlocked a bunch of new buildings for you to place. In *Skylines II*, while some milestones still come with new buildings by default, you’re also awarded development points you can spend in various upgrade trees to unlock buildings of your choice, letting you pick the preferred services, amenities, and transportation types for your city. “Let’s say that you have the public transportation or the other transportation options, and your map is such that it makes no sense to have any kind of water [transport]”, Hallikainen explains. “Then you definitely

THE BUILDING’S PROGRESS

New buildings are no longer automatically unlocked



1 LEVEL & POINTS

The current level of your city, and the number of development points you have available.

2 CATEGORIES

The different categories of buildings you can unlock.

3 BUILDINGS & COSTS

Available buildings within the roads category, and how much each one costs to unlock.

might want to focus on getting the train options.”

Alongside development points, reaching a new city milestone also rewards you with Land Permits. Unlike the first *Skylines*, where you purchased large squares of land measuring 9x9 tiles, you can now buy multiple individual tiles at once. This gives you much more control over where you choose to build, letting you push toward a specific resource to set up farming or mining industries, or chase down a waterway to set up a passenger and cargo ports. It's also worth noting that maps are hundreds of tiles in size, meaning your cities can get pretty massive if you want them to.

CHANGING LANES

In short, *Skylines II* gives you much greater control over where, when and how your city grows. Getting to this point hasn't been easy for developer Colossal Order, a team that has spent much of the last decade adjusting to the reality behind its fairytale narrative. Famously, the original *Skylines* arrived hot on the heels of Maxis' ill-fated remake of *SimCity*, a game with revolutionary potential

which was scuppered by a poorly judged online component and an arbitrary limitation on city size. Two years later, *Skylines* appeared seemingly out of nowhere, boasting all the benefits of Maxis' vision, but none of the drawbacks.

Behind the scenes, *Skylines* was the product of a frenzied two-year development by a team a fraction of the size of Maxis. To build its reboot of *SimCity*, Maxis employed a team of over 100 people. By comparison, Colossal Order comprised just nine people when it started work on *Skylines*, a number that was still below twenty by the end of development. “We had two programmers,” Hallikainen says. “One was working on the gameplay part and the other was working on the modding tools.”

When *Skylines* launched, Hallikainen says Colossal Order would have been “happy” if the game sold 300,000 copies. It would prove vastly more popular than that, having sold over 12 million copies as of June 2022. This was a fantastic result for the team, but also something of a shock. “We were completely caught off guard by the success of the game,” Hallikainen says. “And we did not anticipate the success in the sense that it was never meant to be such a long-term commitment.”

Instead of starting work on the game they'd planned to make after *Skylines*, Colossal Order shelved that project and focused on supporting their surprise megahit, releasing expansions like *After Dark*, *Snowfall* and *Industries*. As they continued to add new features to *Skylines*, they increasingly ran up against the game's technological limitations. “The problem with *Cities: Skylines* was that it just wouldn't be flexible enough for the needs that we had”, Hallikainen explains. Features they wanted to add, like proper simulation of seasons, proved impossible with *Skylines'* original engine. “It has lived a wonderful lifetime of eight years with a lot of DLCs and things like that. But

SKYLINES II GIVES YOU MUCH GREATER CONTROL OVER WHERE, WHEN AND HOW YOUR CITY GROWS

from the development point of view, it was hard.”

In 2018, Colossal Order began work on a new version of *Skylines*. But the project suffered “a fair share of setbacks” as Colossal Order figured out how to follow-up such a monumentally successful, and by this point comprehensive, game. The vision that would emerge triumphant was a completely rebuilt experience. “There's nothing left of *Cities: Skylines* except the spirit of it,” Hallikainen says.

As with *Skylines*, Unity serves as the technological basis, powering the game's visuals. As well as providing a better-looking experience, Colossal Order also took the opportunity to ensure that buildings are properly scaled. “When you plop down a power plant it actually takes [up] space”. This is also noticeable with buildings like cemeteries. Dead people take up a lot of real estate, it seems.

At the core of *Skylines II* is a “much more sophisticated” city simulation that tracks the minutiae of your city's events more closely. For example, the new simulation tracks the economic flow of your city. “All the citizens have their own wallet, essentially their own wealth level,” Hallikainen says. Your choices in city design will affect citizens' personal prosperity, such as providing the right housing for different demographics. “Families, for

example, will prefer detached house with a yard where there's space, if it's on a location that is suitable for them, compared to students that prefer cheaper housing and apartments.” These demographic needs are noticeable in-game too. When you first start a city, most of the people moving into is are young families with low education, so the demand for low-density residential buildings and industrial jobs is sky-high. As the population ages and the education level improves, you'll see greater demand for office jobs and higher density housing.

TRAFFIC JAM

One of the most important elements of *Skylines'* simulation is, of course, traffic AI. “In cities *Skylines*, citizens would choose the entire path when they were leaving home. They would calculate the route and then follow that whatever happens. If everything goes horribly wrong, they would just despawn,” Hallikainen explains. “In *Cities: Skylines II*, you can actually see the traffic reacting through traffic jams, there's traffic accidents, etc.” One particularly interesting wrinkle in the traffic simulation is the new Road Services building, which sends out service lorries to maintain the quality of your roads. But service vehicles can themselves cause traffic issues. You'll often see a conga-line of cars stuck behind a service lorry carrying traffic cones and temporary road signs.

Skylines II also provides many more ways to manage traffic. For example, the game features asymmetric roads with more lanes going one way than the other, useful for funnelling traffic at an intersection. You can also manually place traffic lights at intersections, and specific road signs like stop signs, and no left or right turns. You can even put down pedestrian crossings to help your non-vehicular peeps get across busy roads.

But the most exciting new introduction to traffic management is parking simulation. After a few hours with *Skylines II*, you'll find your streets growing narrower as they become lined with parked cars. To combat this, you have a wide array of parking solutions at your disposal, these range from straightforward parking lots that come in small, ➤

SKYLINES IS REALLY ABOUT HOW THE PLAYER WANTS TO DO THINGS. SO THE PLAYER IS THE ONE WITH ALL THE CONTROL

HIGH RISE BUILDING

There are four basic types of building zone, residential, commercial, industrial and office.

TRAFFIC

Traffic looks and behaves more realistically, with a broad array of vehicle types including motorcycles.

**SIGNAGE**

Intersections can be customised extensively with traffic lights, road signs, pedestrian crossings, and asymmetric roads.

» medium, large and very large sizes, to more elaborate complexes that come in both underground and overground forms. You can also discourage citizens from parking on the road by enacting parking fees, the price of which can be adjusted for each new district you create.

Speaking of districts, these also let you define other policies around your city, such as encouraging citizens to limit the amount of electricity they use, or recycle their rubbish rather than dumping it in a landfill. When discussing the issue of district-specific policies, Hallikainen stresses that *Skylines* is a “politics free space” explaining that “it’s supposed to be a feel-good game”. I asked her where the studio draws the line on this topic, given that representing things like recycling could itself be interpreted as a political stance. She responds that Colossal order wants to avoid “heavy themes where we could end up having arguments between people” adding, “*Skylines* is really about how the player wants to do things. So the player is the one with all the control. If you choose to have a terrible city where you citizens are miserable, or if you want to see them prosper and be happy, you can do that.” Having said that, she then emphasises that “there are certain things that as a developer, we hold dear” and that there are likewise certain elements, like representation, that Colossal Order “want to improve upon”.

CONTROLLED GROWTH

One of the biggest questions hovering over *Skylines II* is how Colossal Order has grappled with the long shadow left by the first game’s many expansions. Hallikainen states unequivocally that *Skylines II* won’t include every single feature introduced by *Skylines*’ add-ons. “We absolutely cannot have ten years’ of *Cities: Skylines 1* content done.” »

PARKING MAD

They paved paradise...

**1 ROADSIDE**

Without a proper parking system, your roads will become clogged with cars.

2 CAR PARK

Car parks come in different sizes, so make sure you build one suitable for the area’s traffic density.

3 CAR PARK MENU

You can adjust the parking fee for each car park, while roadside parking fees can be added via creating districts.



TOP: Citizens love to park on the pavement, but parking fees will discourage them.

RIGHT: Land purchasing is much more flexible. There's also a lot of it to purchase.



➤ Instead, Colossal Order has focused on “those things that we feel should have been in the original *Cities: Skylines*, but we didn’t have the time or manpower”. Primarily, these are features which have a systemic effect on the game, like a full day/night cycle, which the original *Skylines* launched without. As already mentioned, one of the most important *Skylines* expansions folded into the base sequel is specialised industries, which is crucial for enabling more distinctive cities, and empowering the sequel’s more advanced management systems. These let you subsidise specific industries, whether that’s vegetable farming or oil drilling, to boost their productivity. “If the management and the simulation part of [*Skylines*] is your interest, you can definitely go and see detailed information of how it affects [yield] when you support a certain production.”

Some formerly expansion exclusive features will not only be included in the base game, but will be more advanced than they were before. The most significant of these is seasons, a topic Hallikainen is especially passionate about. “Since we live in Finland, we are very used to the fact that we have long, dark, cold winters,” she says. “If I want to build my hometown, I can have the seasons reflect how it is, then we have snow and need to make sure that you have snowploughs clearing the roads.” Seasons will also affect your city at a simulation and economic level. “If there is a climate that is very, very hot, you have [air conditioners] running, there might be all sorts of effects and consequences of the climate that you have to take into consideration.”

Other *Skylines I* expansion features make a more limited appearance in the base game, such as disasters. *Skylines II* includes a few disasters,

SKYLINES II INCLUDES A FEW DISASTERS, LIKE FOREST FIRES AND TORNADOS, AS WELL AS DISASTER-RELATED BUILDINGS

like forest fires and tornados, as well as disaster-related buildings like emergency shelters, early warning systems, and fire watchtowers. But disasters are also something the team has more ideas for post-release “Something that we want to definitely bring in the future is that we would have climate specific natural disasters,” she says. In other words, if you were building a city in a warmer climate, you’d be more likely to experience events like tornados and forest fires.

At present, it’s not entirely clear how such features would be released to players, whether they’d come in the form of free updates, or as part of paid expansions. There are elements of the game that seem primed to facilitate the latter, like extra city themes. According to Hallikainen, creating each of these involves building “thousands of assets”, so it seems unlikely that Colossal Order would just give them out for free. Then there are features which Hallikainen is keen to enhance post-launch that are “not all the way yet”, like seasons. “We’ll see how far we can push it before the release,” she says. “But it’s also something that is a big new feature for us, so

we’re looking forward to continue working on that.” This also applies to *Skylines II*’s modding support. “The editor is something that we want to have more features added than what we have now time for,” Hallikainen adds.

CUTTING THE RIBBON

With little time to go before launch, Hallikainen is excited, but also nervous. “There’s a lot more pressure,” she says. With *Skylines II*, Colossal Order is no longer the young pretender to the city-building throne, it now sits on that dais, and with the privilege of that position comes greater expectation. “What we are very much looking forward to seeing is how do people feel when they get to play the game? Is it a superior game to *Cities I*? I think gameplay wise we are where we want to be. I think the game is great. But to be able to hear from the fans [about whether] they agree? It’s very, very scary.”

In the time I’ve spent with it, *Skylines II* feels like a strong foundation, more expansive flexible, and detailed than vanilla *Skylines* was at launch. The new progression systems are a smart advancement, making building new cities feel less like going through the motions. The traffic simulation is undoubtedly improved, and managing parking is way more fun than I imagined it could be. There are other little things that impress to, like upgradeable buildings and more reactive radio stations, with DJs commenting on heavy traffics and music being interrupted for alerts about nearby fires.

Colossal Order has built itself a hard act to follow, and it’s likely to be a while before the sequel reaches its full potential. The story of *Skylines II* won’t end at launch, Colossal Order plans to support it for years to come. And it has two advantages over 2015. The first is an actual plan, and the second is a game purpose-built with a vision of the future. ■

UPGRADE

Extensions etc

Placing new buildings in *Skylines II* is no longer a ‘one and done’ affair. You can now upgrade buildings with extensions and new facilities. Here’s a ‘before and after’ example of a fully upgraded primary school, complete with playground and adjoining children’s clinic.



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LEAP *of*

FAITH

Chronicling the **ASSASSIN'S CREED** saga on PC. *By Kyle Hoekstra*

Across 13 mainline entries, the best-selling series has explored Renaissance Italy, North America in revolt and exotic ancient worlds, with every game stretching in new directions to create a breathtaking open world, while retaining indisputable *Assassin's Creed* qualities. Here, we traverse the history of the series.



Assassin's Creed *2007, PC 2008*

Stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent, hide in plain sight, and never compromise the Brotherhood: the Assassin tenets, as instructed by Master Al-Mualim to an insolent Altaïr early in *Assassin's Creed*, set the irresistible conspiratorial tone for the franchise to follow.

Assassin's Creed famously had its roots in a new take on *Prince of Persia*. Instead, the team at Ubisoft Montreal including Patrice Désilets, who fostered the original concept, delivered an anti-prince. He could still climb, but now the platforms embraced the contours of a city. The freedom in traversal was revelatory, and it's striking how successful the first iteration still feels overall. The central character they conceived was not a romantic hero who belonged in *One Thousand and One Nights*, but a cold-hearted killer of princes, a calculating bastard despised even by his colleagues.

During the game, Altaïr would hone his instincts in accordance with the ancient, mysterious creed. Players would be able to stalk targets, plan

their routes for dispatching them, and retreat – all without being seen. This was the promise of *Assassin's Creed*'s E3 2006 trailer, which sees our Assassin in now iconic garb stabbing with his hidden blade and vanishing into a group of scholars. In practice, players weren't so much hidden blades as counter-riposting battering rams. The fantasy of this secretive sect, working from the shadows to execute strategies of their own making, never really squared with the formulaic gameplay, whose design failed to keep pace with everything else.

HONE HIS INSTINCTS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE ANCIENT, MYSTERIOUS CREED

Missions expected a predictable routine of pickpocketing or eavesdropping for information, before progressing towards a final assassination target: a traitor, a grand master, or a merchant. Approaching targets through different environments affords some sandbox imagination, but missions just as often end in a slog of clobbering guards than a swift heart-quickenning exfiltration. *Assassin's Creed* proved its fundamentals, but exhausted them as they repeated through the game.

Yet even when it failed, it was special. Because it answered a question: what would it be like to relive the past? More specifically,

what would it be like to inhabit the Middle East of the Third Crusade in 1191, and to see it from the ground and from the heights of its famous cities? From the mountain refuge at Masyaf, where winding passages led from its village to a formidable stronghold, players journeyed across the Holy Land. Each city had an identity: Acre, distinguished by its Frankish buildings bearing the scars of sieges, acquired a bluish tint;

Jerusalem, in greener hues, featured iconic sites like the Dome of the Rock. Players heard the soundtrack of hymns and oud strings mingle with metalworking, traders' voices, birdsong and livestock. Yet of its locales, the Kingdom, a hub which spoke out to the different regions, is memorable only for its tedium.

In building the world its designers landed upon a cracking, and thereafter trademark, collectible. Located on the tallest structures, viewpoints remain hard to resist. They can be 'synchronised' to reveal the local area on the minimap, triggering an animation showcasing the environment.

UNRIVALLED FIDELITY

Not only did *Assassin's Creed* deliver on players' curiosity with a world of unrivalled fidelity, it provided a tantalising science fiction rationale for how it might be possible. In the present day, the Abstergo Corporation harvests the genetic memories of Desmond, a man apparently pulled off the street and strapped into a machine: the Animus. Walking around Abstergo's offices is as boring today as it was then. But the extradiegetic plot increasingly drew focus as it became clear that Altaïr's boss Al-Mualim sought to exploit the same powerful, pre-human artefact, an Apple of Eden, as Abstergo. They, in turn, were revealed to be modern day Templars.

Assassin's Creed set players down a path of intrigue that exploded into one of the most famous brands in videogames. In hindsight, it's incredible that the original's missions didn't capitalise on its own novel mechanics by embracing the assassin fantasy more firmly.





**EZIO STARTS THE
HUNT FOR TEMPLAR
LEADER RODRIGO
BORGIA, THE FUTURE
POPE ALEXANDER VI**

Assassin's Creed II

2009, PC 2010

One of the best sequels in gaming steered an unexpected new course to achieve new heights of popularity, and its secret weapon was its hero. No, not Desmond, but his 15th century Italian ancestor: Ezio Auditore da Firenze. A suave bachelor of the Renaissance, Ezio is vivid and possessed of youthful naivete when we meet him, where Altaïr was merely a silhouette.

When members of his family are executed in Florence's Piazza della Signoria as part of a Templar plot, Ezio starts the hunt for Templar leader Rodrigo Borgia, the future Pope Alexander VI. While its sci-fi framing continued, the historical narrative saw Ezio recruit allies in Leonardo da Vinci, Caterina Sforza and Niccolò Machiavelli across Florence and Venice, smaller locations in San Gimignano and Forlì, towards even the Vatican in Rome.

Assassin's Creed II crucially delivered on the fun that could be had in such a unique setting. It added more ways of beating and evading enemies. A foe could be disarmed and their polearm used

against them, or assassinated with one of several new moves. Hiring mercenaries, courtesans or thieves let you bypass guards entirely, while parkour was refined with wall-ejects and corner swings – although the best thing about that is the clink of footfall on terracotta roof tiles. You could also manage your 'notoriety', accrued through conspicuous activity, by killing spies and tearing down posters.

The game's period architecture, warmed by a bolder colour palette, helped build a more sensuous impression of a place and made the original's Middle Ages look like a glum time indeed. Although, unluckily, Monteriggioni suffered a mask of murky green post-processing. A database yielded contextual information as you explored.

The sequel added a few light RPG elements, such as being able to spend money on customisable kit in tailors and blacksmiths, and to landlord over your family estate in Monteriggioni, and see it prosper through investing in shops. In doing so *Assassin's Creed II* set the precedent for much of what was to come. Its success gave credence to Ubisoft's efforts to scale it into a franchise in the years ahead.

BLADE IN THE CROWD

*The anatomy
of an assassin*

1 COWL
The Assassins' hood is essential to their distinctive look and evolved from efforts to associate the first protagonist with an eagle.

2 HIDDEN BLADE
The signature weapon extends from the wrist like a talon; Valhalla's Eivor wears it like a badge of honour.

3 LEGS
Scaling entire cities acrobatically without losing breath calls for superior calves and cardio, something Assassins never seem to worry about.





Assassin's Creed Revelations 2011

Revelations wrapped up Ezio's trilogy, sending our hero eastwards to Constantinople. *Revelations* was originally to be a mobile game, and it sometimes feels like it, with Constantinople contrasting with previous settings mostly in art direction. It's a work of narrative surgery: Ezio's journey in *Revelations* in fact begins, and ends, with him poking through an assassin library at Masyaf, turning Ezio's last act into a farewell for Altair as well. Desmond's tale, meanwhile, approaches its climax: in a coma since *Brotherhood*, his excavation of what Altair did with his Apple of Eden via Ezio is key to discovering a way to avert an impending solar flare.



Assassin's Creed Brotherhood 2010, PC 2011

Brotherhood picked up immediately where *Assassin's Creed II* ended, with Ezio escaping the Vatican after having spared Rodrigo Borgia and come face-to-face with a First Civilisation entity. Ezio's first outing was excellent, but his return was even better. The murderous Borgia

siblings Cesare and Lucrezia took centre stage on an impressive tableau of Rome, the biggest and deepest city in the series so far. Its ancient and baroque spectacles play host to inventive missions, while its many (but not extraneous) side-activities like the capture of Borgia Towers marry closely with the game's drive of liberating Rome. The city could be

interacted with in other ways; through renovations like Montiriggioni before it, and through the ability to recruit and deploy assassins in battle. *Brotherhood* introduced something else unique: a multiplayer mode pitting wannabe assassins against each other in cat-and-mouse chicanery, which was actually pretty decent.



CONNOR'S JOURNEY
ENDED UP FEELING
A WORLD APART
FROM EZIO'S

Assassin's Creed III *2012*

To reinvent the franchise in a post-Ezio world, *Assassin's Creed III* aimed big, taking on the American Revolution. It introduced as its lead Ratonhnhaké:ton, alias Connor, an inspired decision warranting an exploration of his Native American heritage alongside the event around which the game is poised: the expulsion of the British from America. Connor donned his Assassin cloak over moccasin boots and a tomahawk, with colonial trimmings – including a pistol

– with which he blended into Boston and New York. Here baroque architecture was exchanged for colonial clapboards and condottieri for British redcoats. And in place of grand cathedrals, Connor scrambled and hunted across the Frontier, a region bigger than *Brotherhood's* Rome.

Connor's journey ended up feeling a world apart from Ezio's. His string of bad luck did include being outshone in his own game by his dad, who Ubisoft boldly has opening the game as a false protagonist before revealing him to be a Templar.

VIRTUAL TOURIST

How to spend your time in history

23%
FREERUNNING

To the consternation and amazement of passersby in early games: "He must be late and she must be beautiful."

20%

KILLING POWERFUL PEOPLE
Or regular people.

20%

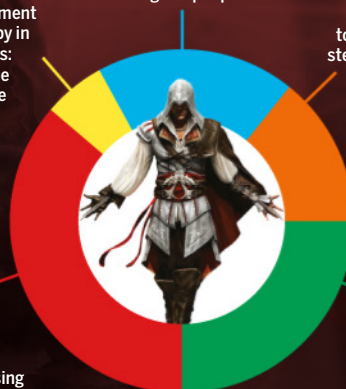
HIDING IN HAYSTACKS
Avoid detection in these top-of-the-line stealth devices.

30%
CHASING VISTAS

Synchronising the next viewpoint.

15%
BUYING CAPES

Don't let this filigreed get-up be wasted on you.





Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag 2013

The supreme pirate experience, *Black Flag* was assembled entirely around a diversion introduced in *Assassin's Creed III*: naval battles and a ship to captain through them. The heart of the game lay onboard the Jackdaw, a sleek and scrappy vessel which players used to exert piratical terror on the West Indies of the early 1700s. Finally, here were vital new mechanics which placed *Black Flag* at the zenith of swashbuckling exploration games.

The Jackdaw is the nautical extension of protagonist Edward Kenway, grandfather of III's Connor. Wearing the garb of an Assassin he kills in a Cuban cove, Kenway is a reluctant hero in facing a Templar conspiracy to deploy an ancient relic, but an archetypal pirate. He prowls island paradises, cracks treasure maps and ascends Spanish Colonial churches. It's at sea where *Black Flag* shines – and the sea that established it as a critical and commercial hit.



Assassin's Creed Rogue 2014, PC 2015

Of all the mainline games, *Rogue* is the slightest, sandwiched between the events of *Black Flag* on the one hand and *III* and *Unity* on the other. It presents Irish American Shay Cormac as an Assassin turned Templar. Tortured by guilt over the former's consequentialist ethics, seen

first-hand when Shay triggers the catastrophic 1755 Lisbon earthquake while on assignment, he sets out to hunt down Assassins in pre-Revolution New York and the North Atlantic's vistas of snow and water. The final act of the American trilogy, developed by Ubisoft Sofia, aimed to deliver more of what made *Black Flag* good, and did just that.



Assassin's Creed Unity 2014

Armed with rebuilt technology, *Unity* took players to Paris in 1789. Where better to showcase its tricks than a city of slums and appointed palaces at the forefront of modernity, riven by revolutionary chaos? This diorama is more fully realised than any before it, where a swathe of the city's buildings can be entered and whose alleys teem with Parisians, doused in smoke and shot through by stunning light. Among them stalked a new hidden blade: Arno, a debonair noble reminiscent of Ezio. *Unity* wasn't all art and engineering. It featured co-op missions, a series-first skill tree and ambitious equipment customisation. Yet its attempt to mix-up the stealth system proved divisive, and though parkour looked better, in practice it often felt prescribed.



Assassin's Creed Syndicate

2015

Syndicate had the poor luck of following in *Unity*'s glitchy wake, with the result of disappointing sales for Ubisoft Quebec's first mainline *Assassin's Creed* game which otherwise put an original spin on the franchise. The clock moved onwards a half-century to Victorian London. Its depiction of contrasts, of poverty, excess, vice and vitality, helped make the furnace of the modern world fathomable. Players switched between twins Jacob and Evie Frye, each harnessing different playstyles. The setting was leveraged for new gadgets including a fantastical steampunk zipline launcher which created new routes across the smoggy London skyline.

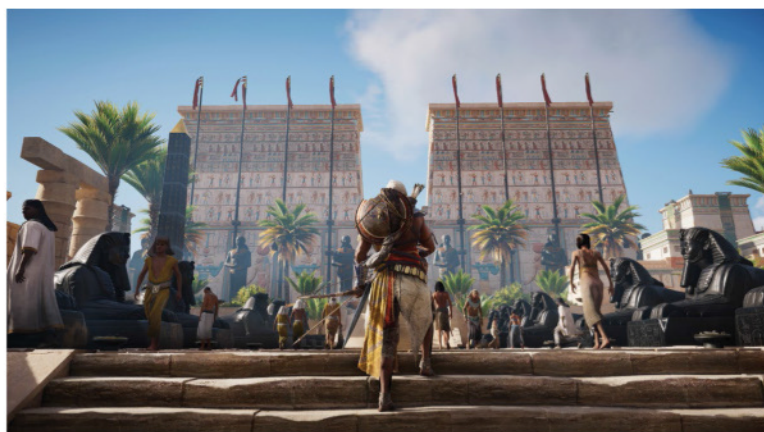
Assassin's Creed Origins

2017

Before *Origins*, no *Assassin's Creed* had ever achieved a single contiguous open world yoking multiple cities and rural environments together, nor any one environment of such scale. *Origins* was four years in the making, which helped Ubisoft pivot the series towards one embracing elements of RPGs: extensive skill trees, quest lines, experience points, and innumerable diversions. Even the act of swinging a sword changed, with the routine of animations transformed into a hitbox system.

Ancient Egypt in the time of Cleopatra was *Origins*' setting, and it delivered. Its astonishingly realised ancient structures include Giza's Great Pyramid, capped by its gold pyramidion, the Library of Alexandria, stuffed with scribes and scrolls, and the Temple at Memphis, embellished with authentic religious rites.

Through the genetic memories of rogue Abstergo researcher Layla Hassan, we play as a vengeful Bayek and occasionally his wife Aya, originally intended as the ultimate protagonist. A new companion: an eagle named Senu, is used to scout an area and highlight enemies much like a drone in *Ghost Recon*. This ensured stealth survived, but the armoury at your disposal meant it was diminished in practice. *Origins*' genre-blending alchemy resulted in a massive, immersive adventure.



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

2018

Odyyssey would resemble a veneer over *Origins* if not for the Adrestia, the Greek battleship that made the Aegean

Sea your hunting ground. *Odyyssey* wired the naval combat, management and exploration of *Black Flag* into its world and placed at your side your new mate Herodotus – a classicist's dream.

As Spartan mercenary Kassandra (although you could also play as her brother Alexios), we set out on a quest tinged with Sophoclean trim to avenge our murdered father, caught in the feud with Athens that was the Peloponnesian War. It's an excuse to travel the vast map, which is too vast really, and its stunning islands and characters alluding to all manner of myths and legends.

In other ways *Odyyssey* saw the franchise's transformation complete. *Origins* had hardly been without irrelevant side-activities, but *Odyyssey* went beyond itself to scatter ever more bloat in the player's path. The result were save games that reached into eyebrow-raising runtimes without ever really approaching completion. But among its more successful diversions were side missions which have you hunt down the baddies of the Cult of Kosmos, pursuing clues and procedurally terminating them until eventually their kingpin is revealed.

To that end, *Odyyssey* also introduced an excellent way of cheating it: the Spartan Kick, copy-pasted straight out of 300, which lets you wham even the mightiest opponents from *Odyyssey*'s magnificent cliffs to their doom.



Assassin's Creed Valhalla 2020

By *Valhalla*, the series had transformed from one ostensibly about secret agents to one about excessively armed warriors staving people's faces in. *Valhalla* covers huge territory, starting in Scandinavia and proceeding to early medieval England – and in DLCs, Ireland and France, too. These landscapes are crammed with detail, spontaneous events, defended camps and ancient ruins.

The game proper begins when we arrive in England on our own Viking longship, as pragmatic and worldly raider Eivor Varinsdottir establishes the settlement of Ravenholme. In securing the colony we banter with allies, depose leaders and fight chaotic sieges. Combat takes its most gratuitous form yet: the camera is closer, the weapons meatier and multifarious. Eivor is an unstoppable force, whose abilities include a move which lets her Rush and Bash enemies into brick walls. Having said

that, stealth is a viable route and sometimes essential. We have a raven, and instinct-led investigations form the basis of many quests.

Unlocking passive skills and active abilities is managed by finding books, recoverable in monasteries. With increased power, it's possible to venture further into regions where more vulnerable monasteries lie. *Valhalla* is greatly entertaining. You meet Basim, whose journey into the Brotherhood is told in *Assassin's Creed Mirage*.

UNLOCKING PASSIVE SKILLS AND ACTIVE ABILITIES IS MANAGED BY FINDING BOOKS

EXPLORE MORE

Other worthwhile Assassin's Creed adventures on PC

ASSASSIN'S CREED FREEDOM CRY 2013

Originally DLC for *Black Flag*, *Freedom Cry* saw Adéwalé aid a rebellion striking back against slavers in Port-au-Prince.

ASSASSIN'S CREED LIBERATION 2014

Liberation first appeared as a PS Vita exclusive before bringing the series' first female protagonist to PC.

DISCOVERY TOUR: ANCIENT EGYPT 2018

Ubisoft's walking tours of famous landmarks worked just as well at giving combat averse players access to the game lore.

DISCOVERY TOUR: VIKING AGE 2021

The latest *Discovery Tour* opens up medieval England and Norway for curated tours of history and culture.

RUN DRM FREE

PC Gamer sits down with **GOG** to discuss game preservation, community engagement and a DRM-free future for the industry

By Robert Jones



Good Old Games, now better known as GOG to PC gamers, has been leading the DRM-free movement for digital distribution platforms for 15 years. In addition, GOG was an early pioneer in videogame preservation, which has become increasingly a hot-button topic for gamers all around the world recently, as more and more classic games become unplayable and, at times, completely unavailable to buy. As such, PC Gamer decided it was high time to catch up with three members of the GOG team to see where this mainstay of PC gaming is right now, as well as how it intends to evolve in the future.

PC Gamer: We know CD Projekt owns GOG, but what was the original vision, and how did it come to be?

Maciej Gołębiowski: CD Projekt is a company that started, actually, not

developing games, but distributing them. It had some successes with physical distribution, with localising games in Poland, and creating collector's editions of classics. I think *Baldur's Gate* was the best known one, and the first that it did.

At some point, I think it was around March 2007, GOG's leaders had a chat about what they saw that's great about physical retail distribution, and what they were able to do digitally. The idea was to replicate whatever was great about those retail releases, and bring it to a global audience.

On the user side, the vision was super-clear. A simple price point, a full collector's edition feeling, books, booklets, goodies, soundtrack, hardback, everything that you would normally get with a retail collector's edition.

You buy a game, the payment is straightforward, the download is super-simple, you buy it, it works, and you don't need to get into the nitty-gritty of the technology and



**“THE DOWNLOAD
IS SUPER-SIMPLE,
YOU BUY IT,
IT WORKS”**





“THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING VIDEOGAMES – IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN VERY IMPORTANT FOR US”

» form, and being widely accessible, DRM-free.

At the time, there were a lot of DRM mechanics on CDs. They were breaking the game for customers, and it actually got to the point where if you pirated the game, you actually had a much better experience than if you didn't, if you had just bought the game legally. So we were like, “This is actually not working. We believe we can do something with it.” And that's what happened.

PC Gamer: Game preservation feels like it has always been central to GOG's mission statement, then?

Bartosz Kwietniewski: For us, it was very important – because GOG came from a desire to restore classic games. Many of them were no longer playable. So for us, that was also why we wanted to restore them. Once they were restored on the PC, we wanted them to be DRM-free, in the way that we remembered them. If we manage to convince publishers to sell their classic games DRM-free on GOG to preserve them, why can't we have more recent games also available on GOG, right?

Preserving videogames has always been very important for us. This is a very important part of our

DNA. We simply don't see how we could continue at the business we are running currently without making games DRM-free. This is hugely important for us.

Paczynski: We were first.

PC Gamer: Tell us about how you bring an old game to GOG, and

overcome things like rights issues and technical problems.

Kwietniewski: A lot of conversations happen. Thankfully, we have a very huge, extensive network of contacts, of industry friends. So this is where the detective work usually happens. We start talking to people. We start reaching out. And then we isolate the right leads. We go to those leads, and at some point you are talking to the right people. But this is just one piece of the puzzle, because once you finally nail down who you should be talking to, that's when the fun starts. There are various factors you need to take into consideration, like how to actually restore the game, and what to do with the rights. Some of them have expired. Sometimes there are soundtrack rights that have also expired.

It might sound trivial, but we may know exactly who has the rights, and they might simply not be interested in bringing the game back. Because for them, it might be considered small potatoes, right? As much as gamers and the media think that this is a great opportunity for everyone to restore a game – when you think of triple-A companies, they think in terms of scale; they think in terms of

GOOD OLD GUYS

Three of the talented GOG business team



BARTOSZ KWIETNIEWSKI

My name is Bartosz. I'm the head of business development at GOG. I've been here five years. Me and our team are primarily responsible for getting games on GOG. And most importantly, securing the most desired classic games, and restoring them.



MARCIN PACZYNSKI

My name is Marcin. I'm senior business development manager at GOG. I've been with the company since 2009. Through that time, I was moving through many different departments on GOG, and, a couple of years ago, I landed in business with Bartosz.



MACIEJ GOLEBIEWSKI

Hello, my name is Maciej and I'm a senior business developer. I joined GOG seven years ago in 2016. I now sit on the board, and have been in its business, market, product and engineering departments. That's 80% of what is going on here.



LEFT: Inside GOG's office in Warsaw, Poland.

BOTTOM RIGHT: GOG has its own in-house suite of tools to convert and remaster classic PC games.

gross revenue. They're growth orientated, right?

For them, it's a very cool story – "Yeah, sure, go for it" – but it's not enticing enough to involve their legal departments, their QA, their publishing teams. So there's a lot of hoops that we need to jump through, finally, to get them to agree. So sometimes what helps is some financial incentive – paying advances to get the game over on GOG, or potentially other platforms in the future.

But sometimes even that doesn't help. Sometimes it's about the right moment, right? If this is not the right moment, then we are waiting for the next window of opportunity. And then we repeat that...

Paczynski: Over and over again.

Kwietniewski: ...over and over again. There are literally cases of games that we now have on GOG that we have been working for years to get them on the platform.

Paczynski: Since the beginning of GOG. So like ten years of work. And after ten years, the planets aligned, and we have the game.

Maciej Gołębiewski: I think the longest lead time – I don't remember

the name of the title, but it was 13 years. Sometimes you try to nail down who owns the rights, and you find out that the rights were inherited once or twice, and, in the end, it's an oil company from the States that owns the rights to play a game, or part of a game.

Paczynski: There's a true story with that oil company, yeah.

Gołębiewski: Those are fun stories.

PC Gamer: OK, so you've hopefully got the rights sorted – who is then doing these remasters?

Paczynski: Mostly, I would say 90% of all of those classic games, at least on GOG, was done by us internally. So we have the know-how. We have a set of tools that we have been developing since basically the beginning of GOG. And we continue to improve those tools, to not only bring those titles back but also to maintain them. Because the technology is moving forward, and there are certain things that are breaking – so we are fixing them.

We are probably the only company that is able to do it on such a scale. I don't know if you're aware but there are close to 3,000 titles currently on GOG. It's actually done and maintained by us. We created those. We QA them. We tested them. And we are showing the quality of those now, and for the years to come hopefully.

So if it comes to details, it really depends on what the game is based on, and what operating system it was made for. This is something that we are particularly proud of when it comes to internal tools.

Paczynski: Yeah, because, technically, a lot of people can do it,

but not a lot of people can do it on such a scale.

PC Gamer: How sustainable is GOG's DRM-free approach going forward?

Kwietniewski: There's no one simple, easy answer. It's a lot of work getting developers on board, and convincing the bigger developers – the bigger the developer, the harder the work it is to convince them. But I think that with GOG being on the market for the past 15 years, we keep growing. We keep onboarding more and more publishers.

We sell millions of games. Thousands are released every year on GOG. So we have proof. We know that it works. It's just a matter of how relentless we are, you know? To talking to the next studio, who's next in line, who we haven't managed to convince to join GOG.

Over the past years, I have been extremely proud of all the success stories that we've managed to accomplish, like getting Konami on GOG; getting Sega on GOG – not only their Western-developed games, but also *Yakuza*, one of the beloved IP from Sega. So we have all of that.

And we believe that with each such success, it will only hopefully get easier for us to showcase to publishers that a bit on the fence about DRM-free. If anything, this is an opportunity. There is a huge market for those companies, and a community that is extremely passionate. We wouldn't be where we are without the GOG community. They also keep us going, you know?

Paczynski: I also think that that is actually getting better, recently. In a way, we are able to convince more and more developers and publishers



INTERVIEW

Good Old Games

» that this is actually the right approach. First of all, nowadays, if you do not have live service your game practically does not have a DRM, because it's available on the pirate sites, like day one.

Two of the biggest releases this year, *Baldur's Gate III* and *Starfield*, do not have any kind of sophisticated DRM. And it didn't prevent *Baldur's Gate III* from selling millions and millions of copies. So it clearly works. It's the same for *Cyberpunk 2077*, which was also released DRM-free and sold millions of copies.

I think that the publishers see that, and are more and inclined to not invest into systems that are making the game less enjoyable for the consumer, because of all the money. It simply does not work.

PC Gamer: Being candid, how is the potential for piracy dealt with when speaking with publishers and developers?

Paczynski: We think that if someone wants to pirate a game, they will pirate it anyway. If it has DRM they will wait for it to be removed, because they simply do not want to pay for a game. But what we've found out is that most people are honest. Well, to some people, that might be a surprising thing. But it's really the case. Most people are honest.

Golebiewski: And I think this can even be backed by our policy of 30 days for refunds, even if you installed and played the game. We don't see people exploiting this policy. Our refund rates are a very, very fair level, I would say. And we don't see people exploiting it even though it's very, I would say, liberal.

Paczynski: We didn't see a spike in refunds or anything like that. That's

another proof that our guys are actually honest.

Golebiewski: So not only can you get the game for free, you can also refund it if you don't like it. But still people are buying those games, and they are keeping them. This is a good thing for us.

PC Gamer: Where do you see GOG is now and where do you want to see it go in the future?

Golebiewski: This is a very loaded question. What's our current situation? What do we want to be in the future? I think I would start by saying that we operate in a very peculiar market – at least from the distributor's perspective. Because we are a digital distributor.

From the distributor's perspective, for some developers and publishers, the theme is the PC market. They think of the PC market as Steam. On the other hand, we have the Epic Games Store, which is a new player in the market, and they're investing loads of money into user acquisition.

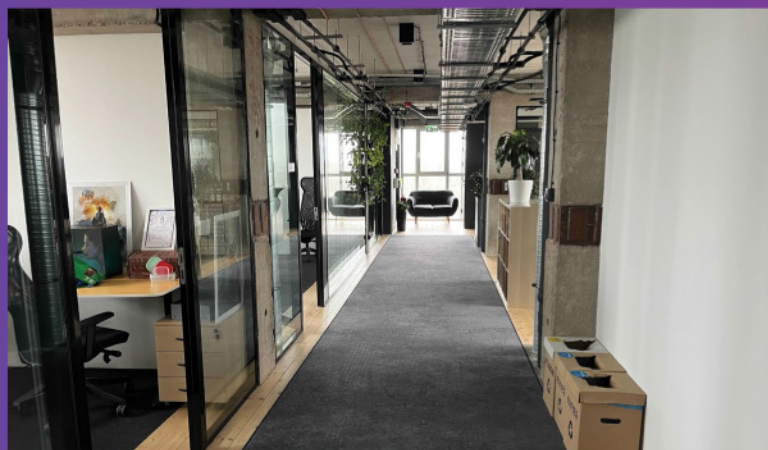
So between those two, it's a pretty tough business. But bearing all of that in mind we are doing a great job navigating this landscape. We're constantly improving our product. We released *Baldur's Gate III* this year, in June, which is a great success for us. So I would say that we're navigating this landscape just fine.

What helps us is the fact that we were the first to address, as you mentioned earlier, the abandonment of classic games. We were the pioneers in game preservation. We were hunting for the rights, and figuring out all of the technology. For other companies, preservation might be an episode. We are here for the long run. We are here to make

BOTTOM LEFT: GOG's DRM-free approach is unique in the industry.

BELOW: Bartosz leads GOG's classic game recruitment efforts.

RIGHT: GOG was founded in 2008, celebrating its 15th anniversary this year.



**“SOMETIMES WE
HAVE RECEIVED
FULL COLLECTIONS
OF PC GAMES
WITH MANUALS”**

games last forever. This is our mission. We will do everything that is needed in order to stay in the market, and to stay with this mission, and to keep making it true.

Also, I believe that the values and the emotions that you choose to build upon are universal: the freedom of choice, the ownership, the nostalgia, the trust – that we trust our users, and they trust us. I think this is the part that makes the brand so unique, and that's why there is a ton of goodwill behind it.

I believe that there is still plenty of work to be done on our side to explore this mission of making it last forever, and to explain it to the industry and all of the big guys and the small guys in the industry why it's important, and why it should be done like this. GOG is a company, but also a force in the industry. If we are able to grasp that force and direct it in certain directions – at certain games, certain companies – I think we can succeed in our mission.

I think you will see GOG transforming into something even deeper and more engaging, and providing more value to partners and gamers who believe in the GOG principles, and our mission of making games last forever.

PC Gamer: A good reason to get up and go into work each day then?

Paczynski: For sure. Whenever we release a title that people have a lot of nostalgia for, the best thing is to read the comments on the forums. That really gives you the drive to try to get the next one.

Gołębiewski: We sometimes get

letters as well from users who are super old-school. Not only letters: sometimes we have received full collections of PC games with manuals – people are like, “Please preserve this. I know you can't legally post it yet but at some point, in the future, you might be able to. I would like for it to be preserved for future generations.”

PC Gamer: I guess my wish to bring *Black & White* and *Black & White 2* to GOG isn't likely considering it's owned by EA?

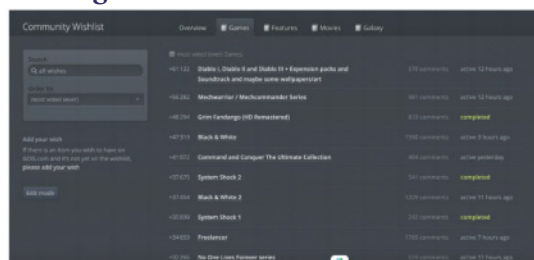
Paczynski: It's actually EA and Microsoft, so it's even worse. You have basically those two multibillion-dollar companies that you need to, you know, grab, and make them talk, and figure out how we can actually release those games.

Gołębiewski: Perhaps, at some point, one will buy the other [laughs].

Paczynski: [Laughs] Let's hope so. We are waiting for that moment. In fact, at one point Peter Molyneux was trying to help us. He actually explained to us what the situation was with *Black & White*, to his knowledge, and what he told us is more or less what I just told you. So it won't be easy. But we will not give up – ever. ■

WISHLIST ENGAGEMENT

How gamers can steer what GOG delivers



The concept of a wishlist is widespread, but it's not used anywhere else with quite such a focus on empowering PC gamers than at GOG, where the service's wishlist is consulted by the GOG team every week to see what games community members are requesting. These

wishlist requests impact what old games GOG attempts to secure the rights for and then remaster and release on the service, as well as a which new games it tries to bring to the service, too. So if you want a good old game brought to GOG, DRM-free, then get voting in the wishlist, now.



PC Version Official Release!!

Notice!

The PC version of Ensemble Stars!! Music will be released on Oct. 12!

Ensemble Stars!! Music GO

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GET IT ON Google Play



Ensemble Stars!! Music



ENSEMBLE STARS!!
IMMERSIVE 3D LIVE
VIVID SCENES SPARKLE ON FINGERTIPS



Ensemble Stars!! Music



FREE LINEUP
CREATE LIVE SHOW AS YOU WISH

Ensemble Stars!! Music



What impressed me first, was the light.

BITTERSWEET PATH TO DREAM
COLLECT PRECIOUS MEMORIES



Ensemble Stars!! Music



EXCLUSIVE OFFICE
DESIGN DREAMY IDOL SPACE

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Spaced out

So *Starfield* is finally here and it truly does offer a big space-based RPG that allows you to build your own spaceship and fly off to over a thousand different planets while exploring and completing quests. Unfortunately, though, as our official *Starfield* review shows this issue, as expansive as *Starfield* is on paper, in reality it feels far smaller and, sadly, it is far from Bethesda's best ever singleplayer RPG.

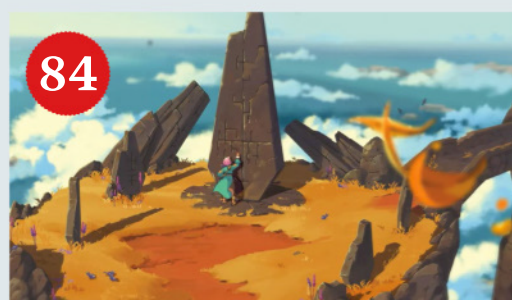
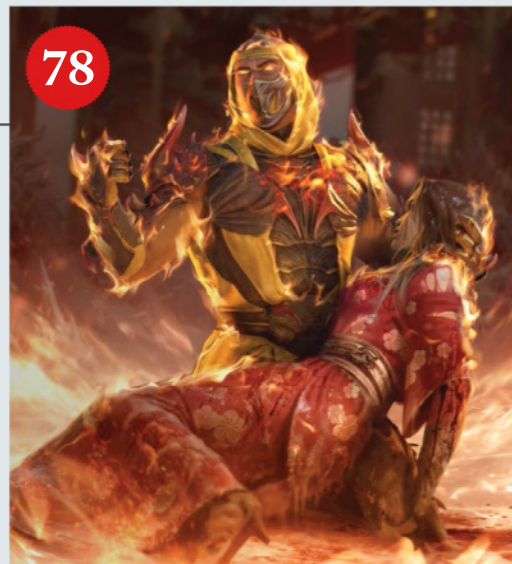
Elsewhere this issue I'm massively enthused to see that *Sea of Stars*, a love letter to '90s JRPGs, is absolutely worth gamers' attentions. If you like classics like *Chrono Trigger* then you'll love this.

And, finally, isn't it great PC gamers are getting big-budget fighting games like *Mortal Kombat 1* on day one? It's definitely time to kick ass and take names!

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's boldly going reviewers...



CHRIS LIVINGSTON

Specialist in
Cosmic smuggling
Currently playing
Starfield

This month
Got married to his soulmate while a space slug slithered on him.



ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Fatal blows

Currently playing
Mortal Kombat 1

This month
Lit blue touch paper. Stood back. Blew a lot of people up with fireworks.

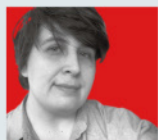


MOLLIE TAYLOR

Specialist in
Smooching gods

Currently playing
Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical

This month
Communicated purely through the medium of power ballads.



KERRY BRUNSKILL

Specialist in
Breezy adventures

Currently playing
Sea of Stars

This month
Did not play *Famous SNES RPG Clone #7632*. Played the ace *Sea of Stars* instead.



MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Rapping with Mr Drippy

Currently playing
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

This month
Started a new hip-hop posse with the Lord High Lord of the Fairies.





NO MAN'S SKYRIM

STARFIELD may be Bethesda's biggest RPG, but it's far from its best

By Christopher Livingston

In my first 90 hours of *Starfield* I walked on over 100 planets, docked with two dozen space stations, blew up more than 50 ships, and smuggled contraband human organs and illegal religious texts. Then immediately got arrested for smuggling contraband human organs and illegal religious texts. Whoops.

The more I've played *Starfield*, the more I've liked it, and for the same reasons I enjoy Bethesda's other RPG sandboxes. It's got the fun collision between structured quests and unpredictable systems which create moments that feel more personal and memorable than many other games.

It took me a while to get there. *Starfield's* introduction is unusually straightforward for a Bethesda RPG, and the first handful of places you visit, including the game's capital city of New Atlantis, are pretty dull. It took about a dozen hours before I started having real fun, and after rolling credits on the main quest with one character and ignoring that quest to become an aspiring drug kingpin with another, I can finally say that, in the end, I do like *Starfield*.

But I don't love *Starfield*. And that's genuinely disappointing because I've loved each of Bethesda's RPGs since 2006's *Oblivion*. *Starfield* is Bethesda's biggest RPG ever, and it shares even more DNA with *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4* than I expected – but it ultimately falls short of the greatness of both of those games.

SLOW LIFTOFF

Bethesda RPGs have a history of awesome opening sequences: the assassination plot and escape through the sewers in *Oblivion*, living through your entire childhood in *Fallout 3*, and of course the iconic wagon trip to your execution in *Skyrim*. So it's almost startling how straightforward *Starfield's* opener is.

It's the year 2330 and humankind has colonised the galaxy, and you're a

miner on a distant planet who finds a mysterious artefact during your first day on the job. Then things happen quickly: you shoot some pirates, learn to fly a spaceship, and meet a few explorers who are part of a group called Constellation, looking to find

more artefacts like yours. I kept waiting for some 'wow' moment that would make the tutorial feel less like a tutorial, but the only surprising thing about my introduction to *Starfield* was that it

didn't contain any surprises.

Thankfully, once I'd left the early hours behind I finally began to see flashes of Bethesda brilliance. First it

I finally began to see flashes of Bethesda brilliance

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Bethesda's long-awaited, huge honkin' space RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON
IntelCore i7-9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Heck no

LINK
bethesda.net/en/game/starfield

was via the traits I'd chosen during character creation: one trait gave me parents, a retired, middle-aged mum and dad, with the downside that I had to support them with a weekly cash allowance. At first my folks were simply sweet and supportive – impressed with my new job at Constellation, telling me they'd heard about some of my exploits on the news – but later they began popping up unexpectedly and hilariously in places you wouldn't expect to see your ageing parents. My space-folks eventually became one of my favourite parts of *Starfield* as they had their own little adventure in the background of my grander one, and their cameos around the galaxy were never pinpointed with a quest marker, particularly refreshing for a Bethesda game. Even just that single trait (and you can pick up to three in character creation) added more to my character's experience than any of *Cyberpunk 2077's* disappointing 'lifepaths' did.

I was also relieved to finally meet an interesting Constellation companion, Andreja. She still wasn't on par with earlier Bethesda RPG companions and the romance didn't exactly give me butterflies, but her complicated, slowly-revealed past and an excellent performance by actor Cissy Jones made me fond of her just the same. Most importantly, travelling with Andreja buffed my stealth and pickpocketing skills, and when I shoved a bunch of extra weapons into her inventory because they were too heavy for me to carry, she selected a massive Gatling gun to wield as her primary. Now that's romantic as hell.

FACTION ACTION

While New Atlantis didn't charm me, there are better settlements out there. Akila City is a rustic Wild West town on an untamed planet – with muddy streets and busy saloons it's a bit like the town of Valentine from *Red Dead Redemption 2* got launched into

GUILD WARS

Here's the lowdown on factions



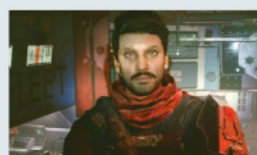
UNITED COLONIES

They're space cops, but joining up will give you a quest that's reminiscent of the film *Aliens*.



FREESTAR COLLECTIVE

More space cops, but at least they're cowboy-themed so you get to show off some drip.



CRIMSON FLEET

Space pirates, with a cool lair on a space station. Plus if you join them, pirates won't attack you.



RYUJIN INDUSTRIES

Stealthy skullduggery and industrial espionage. The thieves guild, but in space.

space. A crusty old marshal in a leather duster enlisted me to deal with a bank robbery the moment I moseyed into town – who better to help him negotiate a tense hostage situation with heavily armed outlaws than a complete stranger?

I quickly signed up to be a space ranger in the Freestar Collective

– they're still basically cops like the United Colonies, but at least they dress with panache. And that kicked off a series of faction quests beginning with a classic Western

premise: a humble farmer being run off their land by hired thugs. It was a long and enjoyable series of connected quests leading through some cool sci-fi environments like a huge mech graveyard and a mining operation inside a crystal-filled asteroid. There were plenty of shootouts, a couple of fugitive hunts and a big bad guy who needed to be toppled, just like in any good Western. It also introduced some interesting lore to *Starfield's* universe as anger and bitterness over a war long past came bubbling to the surface.

While I was enjoying being a space cowboy, I was also enduring the main story quests, which mostly involve the gathering of more artefacts. Those missions could sometimes prove interesting, such as when an artefact had already been found by someone else, like an eccentric collector who had turned his massive starship into a museum of oddities and wasn't willing to part with his favourite exhibit. But mostly these missions are just about battling through scores of enemies in abandoned mines or science labs.

They also eventually introduce a recurring enemy who I slowly realised functions like *Skyrim's* dragons – a high-level menace that randomly turns up when you're trying to get other things done, leading to a fight that's pretty much always the same. It may not be a dragon this time, but it's most

definitely a drag.

More disappointing is a surprisingly repetitive collection of main quests to visit a series of ancient temples, missions that are so similar in format it genuinely feels like

Bethesda just copy-

pasted them onto different planets. There's almost nothing to them: land on a planet, run for about a thousand uneventful metres in a straight line to reach the temple, then go inside and for an identical activity in each one. The rewards are different and occasionally quite good (yes, I'm being deliberately vague) but these temple quests are interesting exactly once, the very first time, and then after that become the definition of a mindless chore.

At least the story of the main quest is a creative one. When I first learned *Starfield* was about finding mysterious ancient artefacts buried deep inside planets, I figured I knew how it would end up, and I'm happy to say I was completely wrong (and even happier to say that pretty much everyone posting story theories on Reddit is also completely wrong). The story of *Starfield's* main quest genuinely surprised me on more than one occasion (to be precise: two occasions), and being surprised is never a bad thing. The conclusion of the main quest also gives rise, quite brilliantly, to *Starfield's* New Game+,

allowing you to retain your character and skills while starting over from the beginning in a way that makes perfect sense within the game's story.

PACKING HEAT

I talked my way out of a lot of jams in *Starfield* – I even managed to peacefully settle the very last face-off of the main story quest – but it's also got the longest, biggest battles I can remember in a Bethesda RPG.

Luckily, the shooting felt just as good as it did in *Fallout 4* (minus VATS) and I came across so many guns I liked that I had trouble fitting them all in my radial menu. Early on I found a pistol that ignores armour completely, making it feel like a cheat code that ends fights early (especially once I ranked up my pistol skill a few times) and a rifle that does more damage with each successful hit, forming the best incentive for never missing a shot. I have a bullpup that occasionally does radioactive damage, a sniper rifle that does double damage against a target with full health, and a laser pistol I'd love to see the patent for because it somehow causes its victims to drop more health kits than they normally would. I dabbled a bit with weapon modding, which is quite similar to *Fallout 4's* tinkering system, but it hardly seemed worth it due to the sheer number and variety of guns, loads of them already outfitted with mods and attachments, I'd come across on missions or exploring.

Complementing my arsenal is my boostpack, which lets me launch into the air during combat, and the lower the gravity on the planet I'm on, the higher and faster I can boost. Ambushed by serpent-worshipping fanatics or enormous angry space roaches? No problem. Just launch 20 feet straight up into the air and fire down at the top of their heads. (Enemies and companions can boost, too, but only a little here and there. You're basically the Dragonborn of jetpacks.)

In general, movement in *Starfield* is majorly improved over earlier Bethesda games, especially since your character will grab ledges, edges, corners, tree branches and nearly anything else you collide with so you can mantle yourself up and over catwalks, rooftops, spaceships, or most anything in your way. Someone ought to mod *Starfield's* movement system into *Skyrim*: you could

The shooting felt just as good as it did in *Fallout 4* (minus VATS)

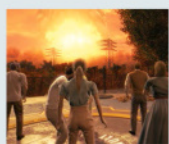
BLASTING OFF Rating the opening sequences of Bethesda's RPGs



FALLOUT 3
You're literally born and then grow up in Vault 101. Best. Tutorial. Ever. **10/10**



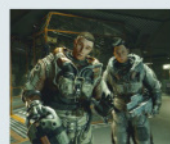
OBLIVION
Meet Patrick Stewart, then flee assassins in the sewers under Imperial City. Fantastic. **9/10**



FALLOUT 4
Your idyllic suburb gets nuked as you seek shelter in a Vault then get frozen for 210 years. **8/10**

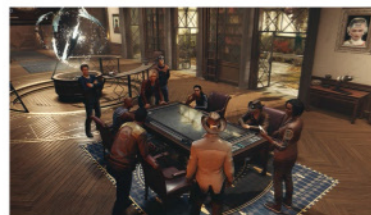


SKYRIM
"You're finally awake" is iconic, but the dragon attack? Honestly a bit dull. **7/10**



STARFIELD
Find a weird space artefact, kill some space pirates, meet some nice space explorers. **6/10**

Photomode lets you pose in front of some stellar views.



FAR LEFT: Hundreds of worlds await, though don't expect them all to be interesting.

LEFT: Meet the team dedicated to solving space mysteries from their swanky pad.



Boarding enemy ships for a long, close-quarters battle is the best.

A few colourful characters make your adventure more interesting.



RIGHT: New Atlantis is just a little too generic to impress me.

FAR RIGHT: Some alien critters are mean, and some are nice, or at least neutral.



Zero-G combat is loads of fun, but strangely there isn't all that much of it.



clamber up to High Hrothgar in under a minute.

TOO BIG TO FILL

Sapping a bit of my enthusiasm for being a helpful star-hopping cowboy was the star-hopping itself. I never expected *Starfield* to be the sort of fully open-ended spaceship sim *Elite Dangerous* is, or for it to replicate the freedom of flight in *No Man's Sky*, but it's hard not to feel like there's something missing here: I never felt excitement or awe, no goosebumps as my engines fired, no sense of grandeur as I set down on a new world. That's because despite cruising from one end of the galaxy to the other in *Starfield*, I never felt like I was really going anywhere.

Click a star on a galaxy map and it'll show you a solar system. Click a planet and it'll zoom in. Click the planet's moon to zoom in again, click the spot you'd like to land (anywhere but the ocean), then watch a cutscene of yourself landing. Space travel, docking, boarding and getting onto and off your ship is a series of cutscenes, black screens and loading screens. Even though it's what I was expecting, it still feels underwhelming. For anyone hoping for passenger or cargo missions, there are some but they're pretty unsatisfying since they can be completed with a few simple clicks. As the hours pass, travel starts to feel somehow both too fast (I clicked a location on the map and now I'm already standing on it?) and too slow (do I really have to watch the same docking cutscene every single time I visit a space station?).

STAR CITIZEN

Then there's all those planets and moons themselves. My incendiary take on *Starfield*'s 1,000+ planets after years of anticipation? They're fine.

I don't know how else to describe it: exploring planets is fine. Many are dull, lifeless orbs, as you'd expect to find in a semi-realistic galaxy. Others are genuinely lovely and my first order of business was to drop a beacon so I could build a base there. Most star systems have at least one planet with abundant plant life and alien critters skittering, stomping, or flapping around, and even barren

worlds have points of interest scattered across the segment of the planet you land in.

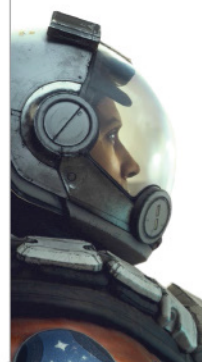
Some of those points can be vaguely interesting, like a huge fungal forest (and the bodies of some careless botanists who visited them without helmets on), the remnants of a stunningly large industrial

outpost, a massive jagged upheaval of ice or a towering rock structure that just about makes it worthwhile to run for a thousand uneventful metres across the surface of the planet to take a photo of. Thing

is, these sights are interesting the first time, but not the fifth time.

What's really missing in *Starfield*'s planetary exploration is what happens in other Bethesda RPGs: you head out toward your destination and get completely distracted along the way: meeting an NPC, hearing a nearby dispute, stumbling onto a new quest, and never quite getting the place you intended to without finding in a half-dozen new things to add to your to-do list. You get some of that in *Starfield*'s cities, and occasionally you'll pick up a signal or be hailed by ship when entering the orbit of a planet, but not while exploring the surface of a planet itself.

**I don't know
how else to
describe it:
exploring
planets is fine**



HOME SWEET ROAM

Spend a little time in the classic solar system



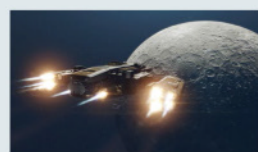
EARTH

It's seen better days, but there are still a few wonders of the world left to visit.



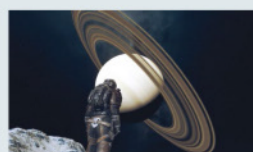
MARS

The red planet is still a hub for humans who never made it into deep space, so pop in for a visit.



THE MOON

If memory serves, there's a historic spot somewhere on the moon. It'll make a great photo op.



SATURN

You can't land on Saturn, but pick a moon, any moon, and you can gawk at its rings all you want.

EQUIPMENT MALFUNCTION

Part of me was hoping *Starfield*'s long years of development and ten-month delay would lead to a more polished experience. Nah. There's as much Bethesda jank on display in *Starfield* as there ever was. Most of it is harmless and occasionally comical, but in terms of genuine, irritating bugs that get in the way of the playing, I didn't have all that many (this isn't a *Cyberpunk 2077* launch situation, in other words).

The systems you use almost constantly are lacking: maps, minigames and inventory. If you visit a planet and want to return later, there's no way to bookmark it on the star map (other than planting a base beacon on it, though you have a limited number of those) so I'd advise taking notes while you play. The inventory system is truly rotten, frustrating in a game where you're collecting anything and everything and trying to shuffle items between your companion, your ship's inventory, your storage crates at your base, and your own pockets.

After all the hype and hope and anticipation, I'm disappointed to say I don't love *Starfield* the way I love other Bethesda RPGs. It's similar in a lot of ways, but *Starfield* never feels as instantly engrossing and transporting as *Oblivion* or *Skyrim* or as wild and weird as the *Fallout* games. It comes close on occasion: one settlement on a far-flung planet is right up there with the most entertaining Vault-Tec experiments of all time. But more often the promising premises I found in remote bases or mysterious space stations tended to fizzle out. *Starfield*'s alien bugs, even the truly monstrous ones, don't hold a candle to *Skyrim*'s menagerie of beasts, and though *Starfield*'s spacers and *Fallout*'s raiders probably share the same basic code (rush and attack player on sight) they just don't have as much personality.

So, I don't love *Starfield*, but I was happy to discover that I do like it. Those first 90 hours I played were far from perfect, but I've got plenty of reasons to play 90 more. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Starfield shares plenty of DNA with *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4*, but it ultimately falls short of both.

75

SPRAY IT DON'T SAY IT

BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK surfs the Y2K nostalgia wave in style

By Funk-é Joseph

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk is a futuristic time capsule that bursts with sonic and ocular swag. There's a primordial videogame joy in these sick combos and great tunes, which pulled me through 25 hours of skating off walls, dodging cops and spray-painting labyrinthine levels. It's rare to play a game with such a fervent sense of self, even when it's channeling such clear Y2K-era inspirations. Bomb Rush Cyberfunk is so fun.

In the first 20 minutes, an evil DJ decapitates my protagonist with a vinyl record, my friends rebuild me into a cyborg, and I'm off on a revenge mission to overthrow this tyrant and 'Go All City' becoming the definitive spray painting crew.

Before I gush about the great stuff, which there is a lot of, I have to say that this wild conceit is funny, and generally lithe on its feet. But it also feeds into one of my few issues with Cyberfunk: the writing doesn't deliver convincing motivations or personalities for its characters. I love that it attempts to flesh out the world with a twisty turny narrative, but little of that storytelling bleeds into the physical environment where I could've absorbed it while doing backflips on a bike.

Each sprawling cityscape I dash through is a well-prepared canvas for play, though, ripe for a cheeky tag. This is the loop: grind on rails, perform gravity-defying tricks to boost your score, complete your rival gang's challenges, out-spray their leader, and gain enough REP to challenge them to a real turf battle until you take the whole city under your control. And every one of the many rollerblades, skateboards, and bikes feels buttery to ride.

The city serves as a colossal playground, teeming with hidden collectibles, challenging time trials, and quirky NPCs who provide you with side missions and enrich the world-building. Exploring the city is an adventure in itself: I constantly found myself getting lost in (mostly)

a good way, stumbling into new secrets at a rapid clip. Each borough is varied and stylised to suit its current ruling gang – the first area is a court of basketball players who have been put together by a boy named The Flesh Prince.

The tagging system is a standout feature. As a graffiti artist, your primary goal is to leave your mark on the city. You'll encounter various surfaces that

you can tag with your crew's logos and designs. The more daring and stylish your tags, the higher your score and the more you contribute to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Anti-cop, rollerskating graffiti 3D platformer full of cool combos and music

EXPECT TO PAY
£33.50

DEVELOPER
Team Reptile

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7000, 32GB RAM, AMD RX 7900XTX

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
team-reptile.com

your crew's reputation. It's a simple yet incredibly satisfying mechanic that kept me wanting to replay levels to strive for the perfect tag, and finding new tags to use kept Bomb Rush Cyberfunk's moment-to-moment joyous.

BEATS TO SPRAY PAINT TO

The soundtrack is an unpredictable force that contorts my face; the sound waves furrow my brows, raise my nose, and compel me to bop along. One minute you're skating in Swami Sound's smooth pool of melancholic ambient drums, the next locks you into GRRL's frantic high BPM acid house, the next shuffle cools you off with 2 Mello's seasoned breaks and vox. These tunes inject a bizarro future feel into a game that is otherwise entrenched in emulating the past. They're the spark of life that makes Bomb Rush feel like a modern gem rather than a rerun. I'm not sure I've ever heard a game soundtrack that compliments the gameplay in such a way.

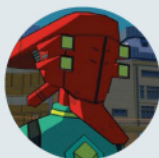
I love that it's coming at the peak of the Y2K resurgence, a nostalgic wave revisiting the cultural and technological landscape of the late '90s and early 2000s and capturing the imagination of a huge pocket of the internet. Bomb Rush Cyberfunk taps into what so many people of the digital world have been longing for: a time capsule blend of optimistic futurism and chunky, colourful aesthetics that defined the era.

More than just a trip down memory lane, Bomb Rush Cyberfunk is a fantastic videogame: a cultural reawakening that celebrates the optimism and innovation of an era that straddled the line between the analog past and the digital future. ■

Taps into what people of the digital world have been longing for

HUMANS OF NEW AMSTERDAM

A who's who of the graffiti scene



RED

The main protagonist. He has identity issues.



BEL

She is always on that phone. I respect it.



TRYCE

The glue of your BRC crew. No BS.



DJ CYBER

A fallen hero of the people, why is he like this?!



PENGUIN GUY

Found this little dude in a secret area.



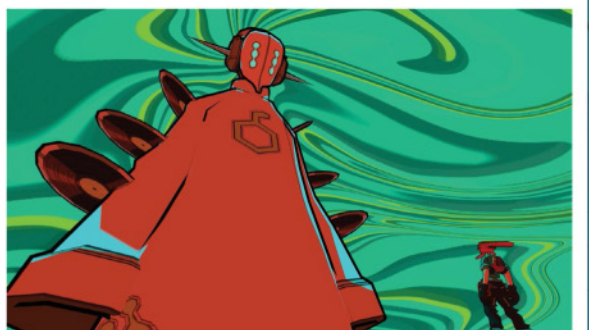
POLICE GUY

Looks like this guy is normal. Nothing to report here.

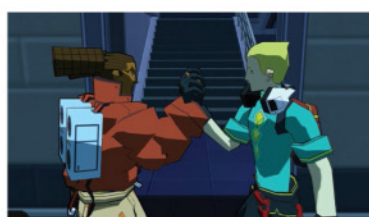
PC GAMER VERDICT

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk reminds us that, sometimes, looking back can be a way of moving forward.

85



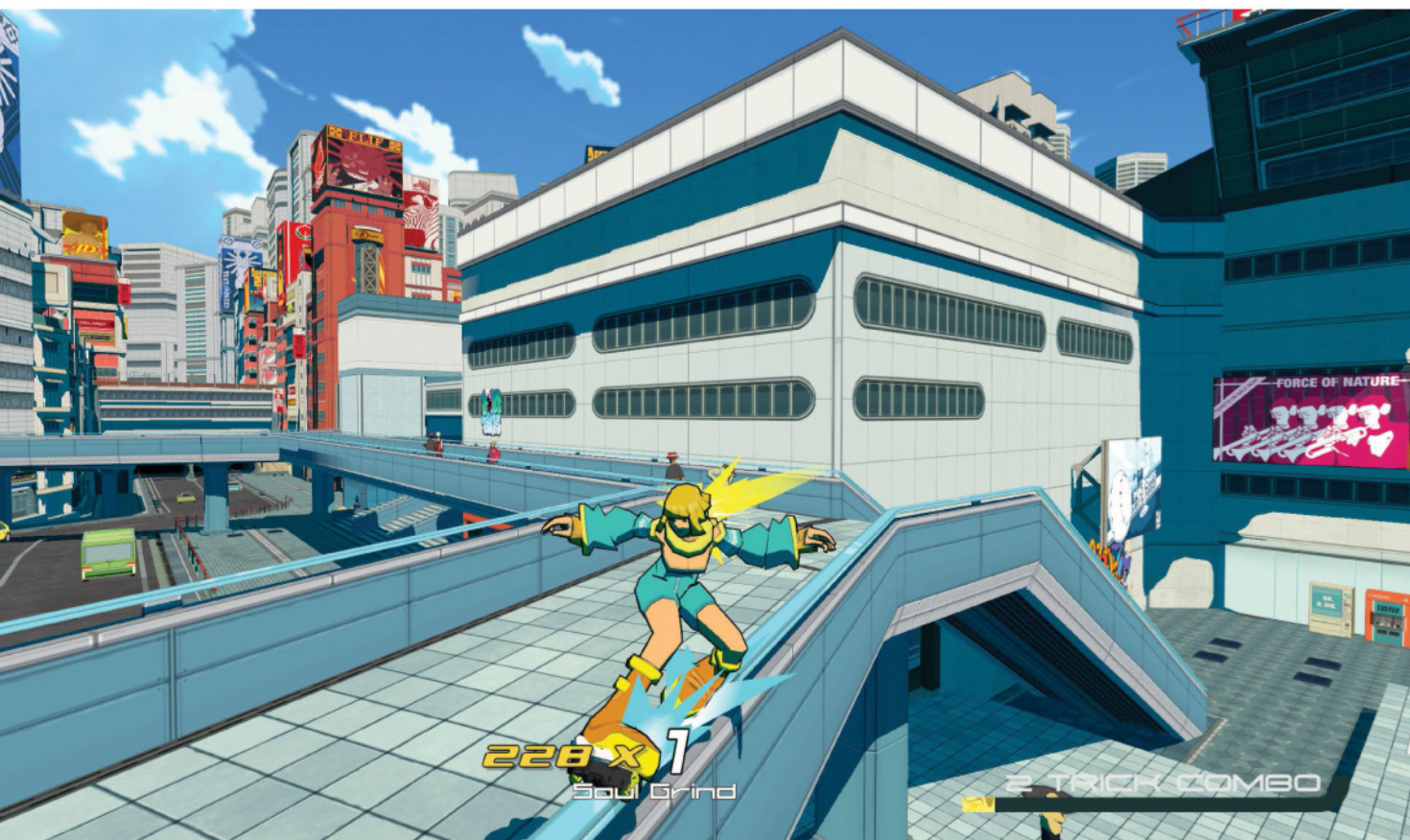
Sometimes you skate with the full crew.



LEFT: We were so happy back then...



BELOW: Talk about geometrically satisfying!



PUPPET SHOW

Even with strings attached, **LIES OF P** holds its own

By Lincoln Carpenter

There was a moment, after watching Pinocchio carve through his 200th rampant puppet with a squeal of grinding gears, when I wondered how we got here as a people. Impossibly, in a year where *Elden Ring*'s expansion is still waiting in the wings and *Lords of the Fallen* is reusing the name of 2014's most middling *Souls*-like, our best shot at an off-brand *Dark Souls* is a Korean-Italian puppet and his chatterbox cricket companion.

But somehow you can put an oversized bonesaw in Pinocchio's hands and it just feels right. While *Lies of P* trips over some mechanical clumsiness and can't escape its inspirations, it's a competent action game with a unique toolset for experimentation.

Maybe more impressively, through the grim spectacle of puppet violence, it's a successful gothic folktale reimagining.

Pinocchio is cool now. That simple assertion is the source of a lot of *Lies of P*'s joy: Instead of the jolly singing puppet, he's a blank-faced metal death machine. He's the kind of weaponised pretty boy you need when Ergo, the miraculous, mysterious fuel powering your city's puppet automata

workforce, turns those same puppets into a legion of homicidal robots. It's such an absurd fiction that even in spots where the gameplay falters, knowing I was fighting as Pinocchio without the whole thing feeling ridiculous was a source of almost manic, surreal glee.

Main combat options are built from standard *Souls*-like pieces

FIBS

Pinocchio's main combat options are built from standard *Souls*-like pieces: I've got a dodge, light and heavy attacks – no shields, but I can block

with any weapon. There's some *Sekiro* in here, too. Perfect Guards nullify damage if I block during a tight parry window, and building up Stagger damage on enemies opens them to execution attacks. And of course *Bloodborne*'s DNA filters

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Souls*-like reimagining of Pinocchio

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Neowiz

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-8700K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

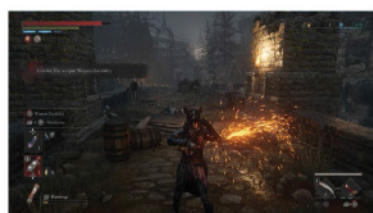
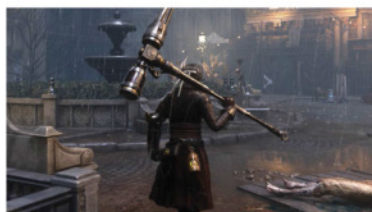
LINK
liesofp.com

through, with the chance to attack and regain health lost from blocked chip damage. *Lies of P* pairs the familiar with audiovisual heft: Pinocchio's gears grind as he attacks and his hits land with sprays of sparks, giving a satisfying impact to his weapon swings.

Unfortunately, *Lies of P* doesn't always benefit by inviting the comparison. Pinocchio doesn't transition between actions as smoothly as the muscle memory I'd built up from *Dark Souls* would expect, which cost me a few victories.

Ergo serves as the souls equivalent. The similarities continue, straight through the interface design and Krat's distinctly Yharnam vibe. I won't lie: the borrowing from its *Souls* forebears is stark. At one point, while descending into some spooky woods after a boss fight in a church against a giant mutated priest, I couldn't shake the awareness of how closely it matched the sequence of beats I'd played in *Bloodborne*.

Even one of Pinocchio's defining abilities, his Legion Arm, feels like a FromSoft appropriation. It's a metal limb that I can swap out at bonfires – sorry, Stargazers – to equip



ABOVE: Pinocchio's built-in arm grinder restores weapon durability.

Sophia, aka the Blue Fairy, aka level-up lady.

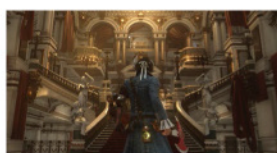




Krat's scenery can be both eerie and arresting.



ABOVE: The puppet babies are weird.



different combat gadgets. It's like having a Swiss army knife for an arm, if a Swiss army knife had a flamethrower, an acid launcher and a Mega Man-style arm cannon.

In other words, the Legion Arms are a hell of a lot like the prosthetic gadgets in *Sekiro*, except here they're flashier than they are effective. Without spec'ing Pinocchio to emphasise them, the couple of uses I had available at each respawn weren't impressive enough that I'd bother burning consumable refill items, like a cool toy that's too much of a hassle to regularly play with. It'd probably take other Pinocchios heavy investment in a specific stat for Legion Arms to really shine.

WORKSHOPPING WEAPONS

Weapon assembly is the one piece of combat in *Lies of P* that feels truly distinct from anything FromSoftware's done. Weapons in *Lies of P* are built from two pieces: the blade, determining base damage, defence and damage type, and the handle, determining attack animations and how its damage scales with stats.

Each part also contributes one of your weapon's two Fable Arts – resource-consuming special attacks like *Elden Ring*'s skills. Finding a weapon means I can immediately disassemble it and mix-and-match its blade and handle however I want. If an enemy seems like it's resistant to

Pinocchio, between lies and repeated, gruesome deaths.



PUPPET APPAREL

A sample from Pinocchio's lookbook

WHITE LADY MASK

A striking and austere ensemble for robots with *Bloodborne* aspirations.



FESTIVAL MASK

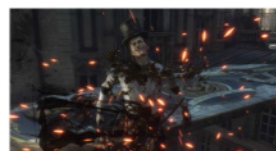
Anything can be fashion if you call it avant-garde.



Lies of P's hub area, Krat Hotel.



Pinocchio can pick up some stylish looks.



ABOVE: Even against mechanical enemies, combat can get gnarly.

my sword's slash attacks, I can swap in a pickaxe head to try blunt damage.

Unfortunately boss weapons can't be disassembled – a shame, because some offer the game's most interesting movesets. But otherwise, any blade can be paired with any handle, even if it shouldn't be. I'm free to experiment as I'd like, thanks to plentiful upgrade materials and the ability to adjust a handle's scaling to align with my build investments.

By the end of my playthrough, my weapon of choice paired the nimble attack animations of a curved greatsword handle with the reach, damage, and defensive bulk of a massive bonesaw blade. The lack of any multiplayer means I couldn't measure my cleaver against the rest of the world's weapons in glorious Pinocchio combat, though, which feels like missed puppetential.

ARSENAL ACCIDENTS

Misadventures in weapon assembly



WRENCH DAGGER
A questionable advancement in knife-fight tech.



WORLD'S LITTEST GREATSWORD
All of the sluggishness, none of the reach.



STICK+
It pokes things like, pretty hard. Poke poke poke.



AXE MADE OF ARMS
Didn't change this one at all. Just hate looking at it.

FAILED START

Lies of P also adds a skill tree to Pinocchio's progression, thanks to his upgradable P-Organ.

Unfortunately, a mishap with my P-Organ (it happens to a lot of us) made the first half of my playtime miserable. Every fight felt stiff, and I never got more comfortable with the combat. Turns out, it's because I skipped over an early P-Organ upgrade to Pinocchio's dodge that so dramatically changed how responsive the game felt, I'm baffled it's optional in the first place. *Lies of P* is so much

better in the hands when you aren't playing it with the equivalent of Goku's weighted training clothes slowing you down.

I've still got complaints, even with a functional dodge. Just about every enemy has a heavy attack that can only be blocked with a Perfect Guard, but the parry windows are too inconsistent to be reliable. In places *Lies of P* has learned the wrong lessons from its role models' worst moments: enemies can launch into long, relentless combos that'll eat my health bar if I fumble a single dodge. Others have long windows after their attacks to continue into a combo, but they won't always, pausing and then reacting in a way that feels cheap. I'll dodge a puppet's first swing, see what's been a safe opening in other fights, and take a hit during my attack's wind-up when I can't cancel into a dodge. At times it seemed like all my options were bad ones when an attack was coming my way.

There's a mismatch between parts of *Lies of P*'s combat logic, too. Legion Arms and my weapon's Fable Arts are meant to be core elements of my combat philosophy, but stingy resource management keeps me from reaching for them. When boss fights already expect me to juggle my health, stamina and weapon durability, I'm not going to fumble for consumables to top up my Legion and Fable meters when I can just go with a good old weapon swing.

Some choice boss fights offer that good *Souls*-like feeling of learning the choreography to a dance; others felt like rolling the dice, hoping I'd luck into a gentle string of attack patterns, especially when the game started dipping regularly into bosses with multiple health bars. Complicating this further, aside from brief side paths for hidden items and opening doors for shortening your corpse runs, *Lies of P* is a linear game. If I was stuck bashing my head against a multi-phase boss, I couldn't bounce over to optional zones or alternate routes for a change of pace.

Still, after realising I could be dodging attacks more than a third of the time, I had some thrilling moments marching Pinocchio into battle with my custom-built puppet cleaver. Even when I was stuck on a one-way road in puppet purgatory, the scenery softened the blow. *Lies*

of P has some truly gorgeous environmental art, benefiting from attention to architectural detail and lush lighting tech. Some of *Lies of P*'s best moments came when I turned a corner and was met with a lovingly-composed line of sight across the fog-blanketed ruin of Krat, puppet corpses impaled on the spokes of the entertainment district's ferris wheel as a warning from the city's survivors.

And the fits? The fits are excellent. I've picked up a whole wardrobe of costumes, from *Bloodborne*-ass dusters to fancy-lad frills, which I can

pair with filigreed animal masks and wearable donkey heads. Pinocchio can chart some bold courses for fashion, whether I'm in the mood for a look that says 'lethal street-stalker' or 'unhinged robot urchin'.

THE NOSE KNOWS

As far as the lies go, they aren't very exciting, despite dialogue choices being a novel addition to this type of game. They act as moments where I had to choose between lying to be kind, becoming more human in the process, or just being a little asshole. But those dull lies have an interesting outcome, with implications for the story that I enjoyed puzzling out. Somehow, *Lies of P* pulls off its gritty Pinocchio retelling, managing the impossibility of incorporating elements from both the folktale and the 1940 film without feeling, y'know, absurd. Even when moments of spotty localisation threatened the vibe, *Lies of P* can achieve an arrestingly creepy tone (though it's still only the second-darkest version of Pinocchio released in the last 12 months).

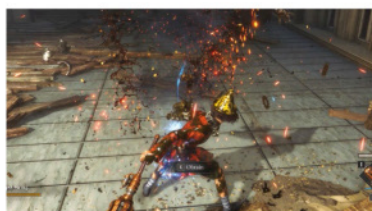
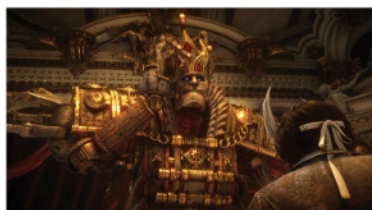
I didn't start the year expecting to be compelled by the connections between Pinocchio's origins, the puppet frenzy, a cursed miracle fuel, and wishing on stars, but here we are. Crickets lead you to strange places. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Neowiz's *Lies of P* is a competent *Souls*-like if you can shrug off its flaws.

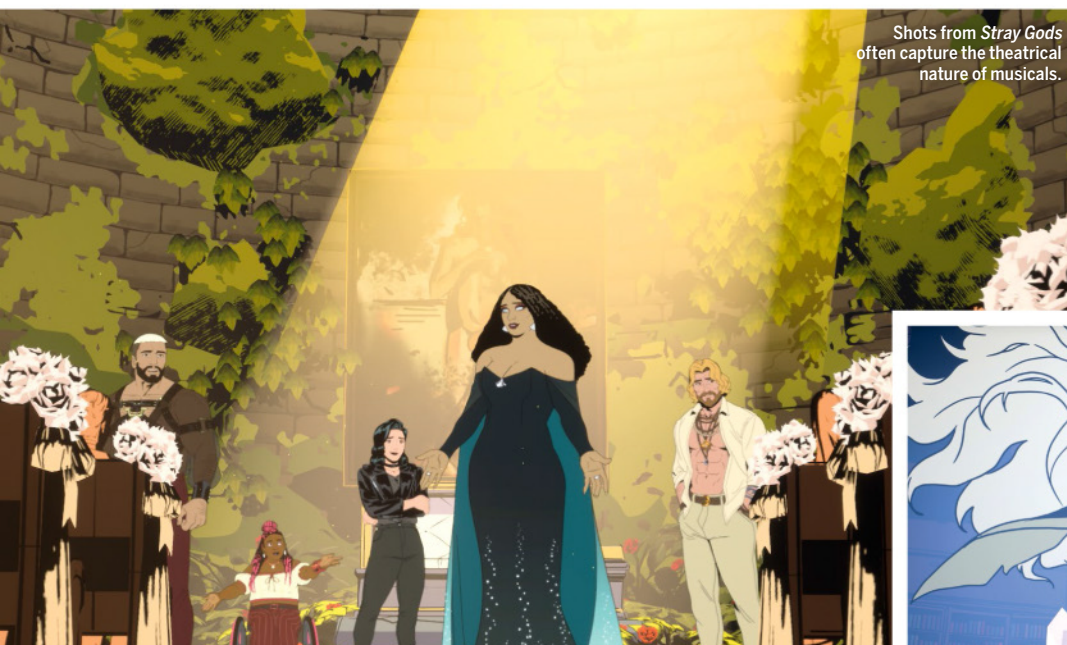
74

Some thrilling moments marching Pinocchio into battle

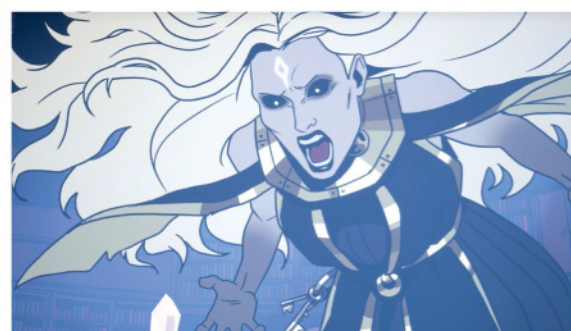


RIGHT: Puppets aren't the most horrifying things Pinocchio fights...





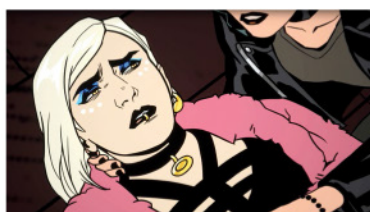
Shots from *Stray Gods* often capture the theatrical nature of musicals.



RIGHT: When Grace's eyes glow yellow, you know the music's about to start.



BELOW RIGHT: Hecate's lovely really, I promise.



Aphrodite, Athena, Apollo and Persephone putting on their best 'disappointed parent' faces.

Stray Gods' colourful, comic book style is incredibly screenshottable.



HIGH NOTE

STRAY GODS: THE ROLEPLAYING MUSICAL is a little pitchy but full of heart

By Mollie Taylor

I've played dozens of visual novels and narrative adventures in my time, and I've still never experienced anything like *Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical*. It's a game that delivers its branching narrative through song rather than the spoken word, boasting a talented cast of voices such as Laura Bailey, Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson. For the most part, it's a wonderfully engaging adventure – even if it is unfortunately let down at points by a lack of attention to detail.

Stray Gods blends modern-day and Greek mythology, putting you in the shoes of musician Grace as she finds herself intertwined with gods like Apollo, Aphrodite and Athena after receiving the powers of Calliope, the final Muse. Thing is, she gets these powers because Calliope has been murdered, finding her way to Grace and passing her gift on before dying.

It doesn't make her look very good, and understandably a couple of the gods think she's the reason Calliope croaked. That's where the Muse's power comes in handy, as Grace can make people break out into song and share their feelings, helping to solve who is actually responsible.

The musical numbers are peppered throughout *Stray Gods*, and it's where the bulk of the decision-making happens. Time-sensitive choices appear throughout each song, letting me tackle the next line in different ways. Each approach can steer the song's melodic direction. A kinder choice offers a delicate tune, while a brute-force attitude switches it to an appropriately harsh beat and lyrical flow. It can make the same song sound totally different depending on your choice, and I found that even when I was frequently switching tones in the same song, it flowed together well.

I really enjoyed most of the songs, particularly the first song and one where I help the love-struck minotaur Asterion confess his feelings to Hecate. Laura Bailey shines in every single song as Grace,

her voice uplifting every lyric and excelling in different musical styles.

A BIT PITCHY

Unfortunately, *Stray Gods'* freedom of choice leads to little musical cohesion. There's hardly a throughline across its soundtrack – the final song tries its best to call back to previous tunes, but after several hours with the game I struggle to recall many of the lyrics or melodies I heard.

It's not the only time *Stray Gods* suffers from inconsistency. For a

I struggle to recall many of the lyrics or melodies I heard

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A musical narrative adventure steeped in Greek mythology

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Summerfall Studios

PUBLISHER
Humble Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X,
16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX3070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
summerfallstudios.com/stray-gods

game heavily rooted in its sound, the audio mixing is lacking.

The game's comic book art style also fluctuates in quality. Grace's design is great with tons of expressive illustrations. Environments like her shared apartment with best pal/love interest Freddie or the gods' Olympus office look like they've jumped from a glossy graphic novel to my monitor. For the most part, *Stray Gods* looks bloody lovely. Other characters look remarkably flat in comparison though. It's most noticeable on folks like Asterion and Aphrodite, sticking out when surrounded by their gorgeously illustrated companions.

It's frustrating because when *Stray Gods* is at peak performance, it shines. Many of the cutscenes are wonderfully crafted and a joy to watch. The writing is witty and feels relatable, taking these gods and turning them into humans who are all carrying their own trauma.

Most choices feel distinct, and I appreciated that nothing ever felt too black and white, no choice morally superior. It makes some of *Stray Gods'* significant narrative-swaying decisions tough, and I'm already excited to go back and do things differently to see what would happen instead – though that's partly because the skip dialogue button rarely worked, sometimes skipping chunks of dialogue instead of a single line.

It's a shame that *Stray Gods* has these rough edges, because it's a wonderfully unique experience full of heart. It needs a little cleanup, some focus dedicated to its sound mixing and a touch more attention to really shine. If you can look beyond an erratic presentation, you'll find one of the most endearing visual novels that's released in the last few years. ■

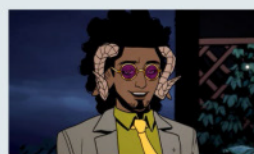
GODS OF LOVE

If you've ever wanted to smooch a god?



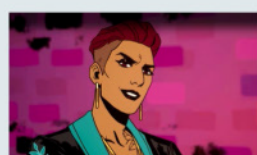
APOLLO

Sometimes you gotta get with the brooding surfer dude and write poetry together. Plus Apollo's the god of prophecy.



PAN

If you're an absolute gremlin who loves causing a bit of mischief and keeping your cards close to your chest, give Pan a smooch.



PERSEPHONE

Some may say murdering your husband is a touch too strong, but at least Persephone owns it. She gives the best hugs, too.



FREDDIE

She's not a god. It's the classic friends-to-lovers narrative, and who hasn't fallen in love with their best friend before?

PC GAMER VERDICT

A distinctive, thrilling, and occasionally heartbreaking musical tale with a slightly messy delivery.

81

BARE BONES

MORTAL KOMBAT 1 is a solid but oddly soulless fighter

By Robin Valentine

Few long-running series have reinvented themselves for the modern era as successfully as *Mortal Kombat*. Since the 2011 reboot found a fresh yet familiar formula for its brawls, and finally made some sense of its sprawling lore, each new entry has had its own distinct and exciting identity, from *X*'s explosion of new characters to *11*'s clash of past and present. So the question is, what's *Mortal Kombat 1*'s new take on the series?

NetherRealm has pitched this as another soft reboot for the series – a fresh entry point that sheds much of the confusing backstory and welcomes in new players. But that's not really what we've got. Instead, *Mortal Kombat 1* feels more entrenched in the series' past than ever, struggling to iterate on its core systems or to tell an accessible new story. It's a fun fighting game, but it's the weakest of the *MK*s, and it's disappointingly lacking in the series' true greatest asset: personality.

The long and short of its eight hour cinematic story mode is that hero-turned-god Liu Kang has rebooted time to create a more peaceful version of the setting, but a mysterious villain is working to set

history back on a more violent path. The first half is promising, seeming to strip things back to a simple, martial arts movie style of story, but this new setup barely gets the chance to find its feet before we're back into mind-bending nonsense. I love a

good *MK* multiverse mess, but this supposed fresh start quickly gets bogged down in reheated ideas, twists that rely on you knowing what happened not only in *MK11* but in its DLC expansion too, and

bizarre tributes to the early-2000s era games. As a long-time fan, I couldn't help but feel it's all been done much better before; for a newcomer, I suspect it would all be impenetrable.

The core experience of picking a character and mashing buttons until

Someone as clumsy as me can put together a few combos

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest entry in the long-running hyper-violent fighting game series

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
NetherRealm Studios, QLOC

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

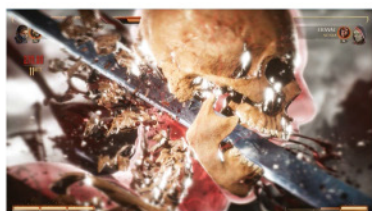
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
mortalkombat.com

you get to rip the other guys' head off is fundamentally still good. *Mortal Kombat* remains the perfect fighting game for people who aren't very good at fighting games – with its relatively slow pace, simple inputs, and forgiving timing, even someone as clumsy-fingered as me can put together a few combos and have a good time. And that's not to say there isn't depth, either – a quick browse of YouTube will show you series veterans already figuring out wonderfully brutal ways to tear each other to bits online.

But what's here feels copied over pretty directly from *MK11*. The only real improvement is in what's taken away – it ditches gimmicky mechanics like Krushing Blows while holding onto simple, fun stuff like perfect blocks and the Fatal Blow special moves. The big new addition is Kameos. This essentially gives your fighter a sidekick, who can jump in to throw out one of a small set of special moves to supplement your own. It works, and it's easy to get to grips with, but it feels pretty basic and unimpressive compared to the variant system of *X* or the full custom loadouts of *11*.



TOP: If you've ever wanted to know why Quan Chi is so pale, or where Kung Lao got his hat, all is revealed in *MK1*.





ABOVE: Characters returning from the 3D era struggle to be memorable. They weren't that well liked first time around.

BLOOD SIMPLE

Performance has been slick on my machine, despite the series' history of dodgy PC ports – I've had no trouble hitting a consistent 60fps. The offering there is functional but barebones – there's ranked and unranked battles and not a lot else. Obvious QoL elements like queuing up in practice mode are conspicuously absent, but more damning is how much *MKI's* lack of personality manifests here. There are no intro dialogues in ranked (bizarrely the only place these seem to play is in unranked online matches and local play) and customisation has been hugely pared back, for an oddly utilitarian experience.

If all you need out of a new *MK* is a stable ranked mode and a Sub-Zero with a good ice slide, *Mortal Kombat 1* provides, and catching your opponent in that combo you've been practising is as satisfying as ever. But if you're a longtime fan excited to see what new ideas the team has cooked up, or a newcomer hoping to see what all the fuss is about, I think that like me you'll be left a little cold – and a tad apprehensive about where the series goes from here. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Solid fighting can't disguise a lack of personality and failure to reboot the *Mortal Kombat* story.

70

2D animated cutscenes in Invasions mode and as Tower endings add to the story.



GOING SOLO

The new Invasions mode



1 INVASIONS

Invasions essentially replaces both the Krypt and Towers of Time.

2 NODES

You move between nodes on a top-down map reminiscent of mobile games.

3 LEVEL UP

You can level up and equip items, to try and compensate for the modifiers.

PREEM, CHOOM

CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY is a tense spy thriller with strong narrative

By Ted Litchfield

Given *Phantom Liberty*'s superspy theme, I expected, nay, demanded a good high-society shindig infiltration level, and *Cyberpunk 2077*'s first and only expansion pack delivered. The centrepiece of the soiree mission was a long, tense dialogue puzzle where I had to earn the trust of a pair of deliciously awful French twins while playing high stakes roulette. I had to engage, provoke, and eventually befriend the international con artists all while I watched my funds provided by the FIA (*Cyberpunk* future CIA) dwindle away. Shoulda bet on black. At the last minute I chose a particularly inflammatory and insulting dialogue option and my handler pre-emptively chewed me out over the radio, but the little freaks absolutely ate it up. Maybe I *am* cut out for this superspy stuff.

Phantom Liberty is an extra-refined bite of *Cyberpunk 2077* – an expansion pack's expansion pack. It doesn't reinvent the game as a whole, but it's a fantastic final outing for V and Night City, as well as one of the best individual stories CD Projekt Red has told to date. Meanwhile, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s 2.0 update, free to all players, has reformed the original looter shooter gear deluge and +5% poison resistance-style perks system, giving us a more solid RPG whose under-the-hood systems

better complement its shooting, slashing, and stealthing.

After a legendarily fraught launch and three years of rebuilding,

Finally the RPG its world and characters deserved

Cyberpunk 2077 is finally the RPG its world and characters deserved, and *Phantom Liberty* is a fine last hurrah for a game that's taken CD Projekt so long to hone.

It took me a second to come around to

Phantom Liberty's setup: rescue the president of the New United States after Space Force One (LOL) gets shot down over Dogtown, a newly added district of Night City that

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The long-awaited expansion to CDPR's first non-*Witcher* RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
CD Projekt Red

PUBLISHER
CD Projekt

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-12600K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

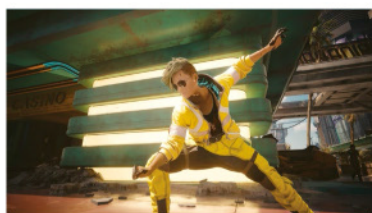
LINK
shorturl.at/buLPV

looks like the Thunderdome by way of *Blade Runner*: 2049's haunting, irradiated Las Vegas.

NOVA NARRATIVE

CD Projekt is great at teeing up a story that seems like it'd be derivative or Spike TV-edgy, then absolutely curving you with unexpected depth and nuance, and that's no different here. President Myers comes off as a down to earth, one-of-the-guys former soldier, like Harrison Ford from *Air Force One*, but there's a serpent-like ambition to her that comes out as the story goes on.

Idris Elba is a real treat as Solomon Reed, a reluctant killer roused from deep cover to "serve his country" even though he hates Myers' guts and was burned by his own agency years ago. They've both got priors with Songbird, a brittle, emotionally compromised hacker with the strange ability to jack into your Keanu Reeves-inhabited brain relic who also claims to have a cure for that bad boy brain rot. Reeves' Johnny Silverhand is back for the ride too, and while he seems to be a bit of an acquired taste (former PCG editor James Davenport dubbed



ABOVE: Don't just stand there, let's go to it, strike a pose, there's nothing to it.

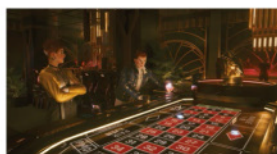


Graphically, Cyberpunk has never looked better.



TOP: The cyberware systems within the game have been notably reworked.

ABOVE: There's nothing quite like a Dogtown disco.



him "John Prick"), he makes for a great asshole Greek chorus in *Phantom Liberty*.

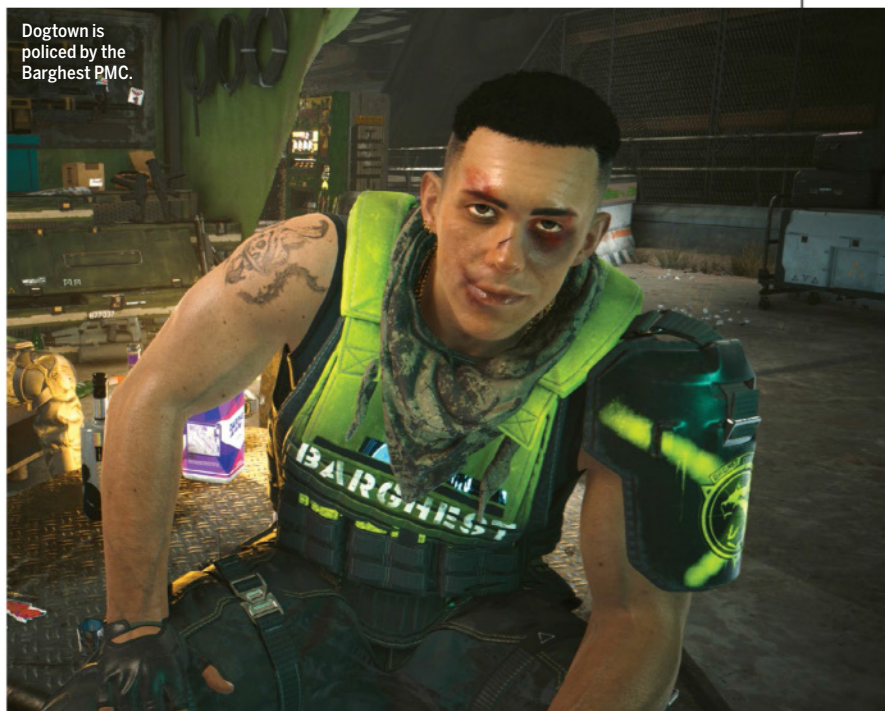
The main players in *Phantom Liberty* all think they're doing the right thing and that they don't have any other options, all while expecting you to back them up, and that eventually shakes out into one of the toughest choices I've had to make in an RPG: you have to betray someone, and both ending paths feature their own triumphs and gut punches.

PUNCHING UP

The path I chose was way more gut punches than triumphs, so I think I picked the bad ending. From chatting with my coworkers, though, the other option sounds at least bittersweet, and my RPG perfectionist drive to get the best ending possible is conflicting with just how good that bad ending was. The Darkest Timeline had me feeling like my stomach had a lead weight in it from the point of no return to credits rolling, and by the end, the bastards got away with everything. Forget it V, it's Dogtown.

Phantom Liberty's main quests are a series of real dingers – I was wondering how it would stack up post-*Baldur's Gate III*, but CD Projekt makes a case here for more cinematic, bounded RPG design. Setpieces like that roulette table or the tense lead-up to the point of no return just popped for me. CD Projekt really is in the same league

Dogtown is policed by the Barghest PMC.



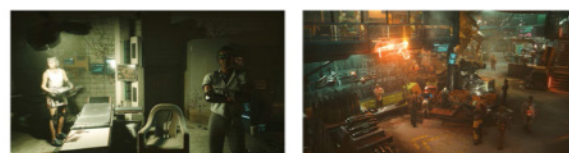
CYBERPUNK 2.0

What does the game's latest patch deliver?

Phantom Liberty launches alongside patch 2.0 for *Cyberpunk 2077*, which itself delivers some big changes to the game, regardless of if you buy the DLC or not.

Patch 2.0 delivers redesigned cyberware, skills, perks and relic abilities, a big AI combat overhaul, including a revamped police force and vehicle combat, as well as a host of new weapons, quests, clothing and gigs. The update is out now and is totally free. Preem!





ABOVE: You can buy some serious new hardware in Dogtown.

BOTTOM LEFT: Skill trees and abilities have been overhauled.

DOGS OF WAR

Meet Phantom Liberty's major players



MYERS
Former Militech CEO and current President of the New United States of America.



SONGBIRD
A talented netrunner and President Myers' right hand in leading the NUSA.



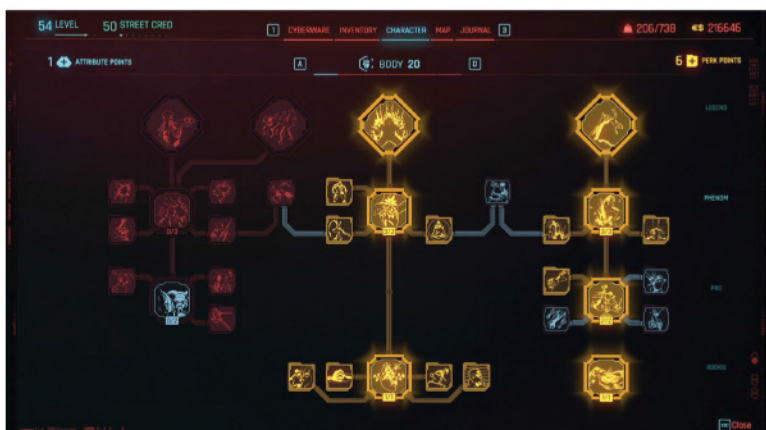
SOLOMON REED
An experienced FIA agent and expert covert intelligence operative.



ALEX
A talented shapeshifter, Alex works for the NUSA's Federal Intelligence Agency.



HANSEN
Colonel Hansen rules Dogtown with an iron fist. Has strong strategic foresight.



as Naughty Dog or Sony Santa Monica when it comes to delivering draw-dropping moments, but sets itself apart with the RPG choice, consequence and interactivity I crave.

GIG ECONOMY

I always enjoyed *Cyberpunk's* smaller sidequests, or gigs, too. Many are simple but enjoyable 'go here and kill everyone as fits your playstyle' deals, but some of them felt more like full-on side stories with voice acting, a twist, and maybe even a gameplay curveball. *Phantom Liberty's* gig additions firmly fall into the latter camp, and I loved each one. A rescue operation for an underworld doctor gets complicated by his history of unsavoury practices in one gig, while another sees you infiltrating the youth sports academy of the future, specialising in cybernetically enhanced children.

My favourite tasked me with helping out a pair of hapless chucklefuck detectives caught with their proverbial pants down in Dogtown and panicking for their lives. I felt like Harvey Keitel swooping in to save the day as the Wolf in Pulp Fiction, and the entire thing had this slapstick absurdity from beginning to end that I adored.

DOGGONE IT

It makes sense that Dogtown is physically siloed off from the rest of Night City, but I found myself wishing it was either better-

integrated into the main game, or even more of a hostile, alien, alternate zone. The 'save the President' plot actually resolves itself pretty quickly in favour of a deeper conspiracy, and you're subsequently free to come and go between Dogtown and Pacifica as you please, but the DLC really doesn't have you doing much in Night City proper aside from running quick errands like delivering procedurally spawned cars for its new, literal grand theft auto minigame.

STELLAR CAST

Cyberpunk's base game has a stellar cast, and while this is a separate story, it feels weird to have the game's

effective send-off have such little interplay with characters like Judy, Rogue, Kerry, or even Takemura. The lack of involvement for the game's four romanceable characters felt particularly odd to me. I had the chance to

tell my base game beau that I was on a crazy new job for the *Cyberpunk* Intelligence Agency, but it basically felt like I was telling her, "I'm gonna be in the expansion pack for a while babe, don't wait up."

While Dogtown has a really cool, distinct look from the rest of Night City, it's still rocking the same basic design, and I found that a little disappointing. With the promise of a denser, smaller sandbox to play around in, I was hoping CD Projekt might flex its muscles making something closer to a *Deus Ex* hub.

**I felt like
Harvey Keitel
swooping in to
save the day as
The Wolf**

Now that 2.0 has fixed *Cyberpunk's* loot and progression woes, its biggest remaining issue to my eye is that there's no real call to explore or poke around its world outside explicit mission objectives. Night City just isn't tactile or inviting the way a good immersive sim or even the *Elder Scrolls* games manage to be – no breaking into people's apartments and reading their diaries, you can only snoop in gig/mission-sanctioned areas. I think Dogtown's smaller, more manageable canvas could have been an opportunity to create something like that within *Cyberpunk 2077*. The visual feast of Night City has always clashed with how uninteractive its world is.

QUALITY DECADE

Still, I'm extremely pleased with *Phantom Liberty* – CD Projekt can hang with the big dogs when it comes to cinematic storytelling, with a quality of writing and world building that I prefer to the likes of Sony's vaunted first-party lineup. I've been eager to see what CD Projekt would do with a *Cyberpunk 2077* expansion ever since first beating the game at the end of 2020, and *Phantom Liberty* is a splendid sendoff for the world CD Projekt's been working on for the better part of the last ten years. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Phantom Liberty doesn't reinvent *Cyberpunk 2077*, but it is CD Projekt firing on all cylinders to tell a great RPG story.

87



ABOVE: Talk about being overly relaxed behind the wheel!



There's something familiar about these guys.

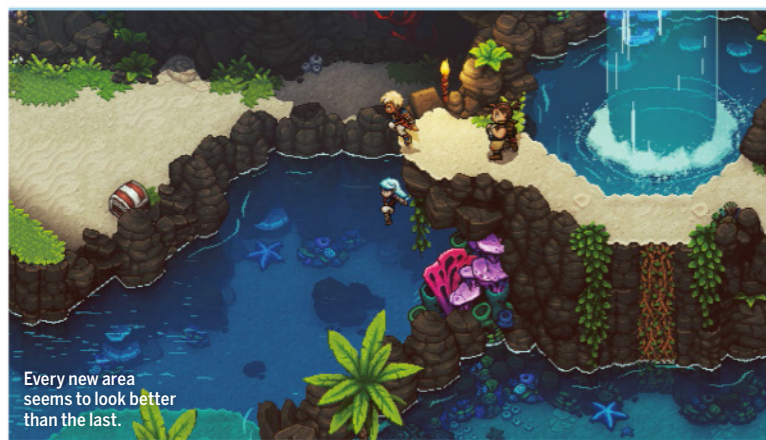
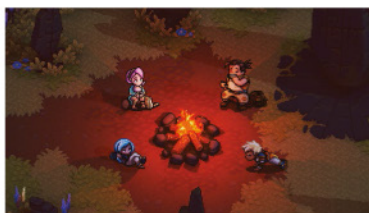
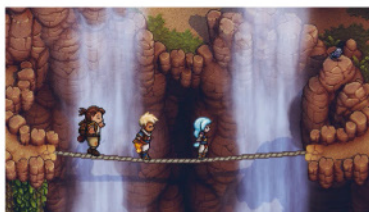


Mood-setting cinematics break up the action from time to time.



RIGHT: Thankfully you can't actually fall off these high ropes.

BELOW: Simple puzzles pop up often, but don't spoil the flow.



Every new area seems to look better than the last.



SMOOTH SAILING

SEA OF STARS blows a fresh breeze through an old genre

By Kerry Brunskill

Sea of Stars is another indie RPG built in *Chrono Trigger*'s image. There's the seamless battle transition, there's the techs, sorry – combos, there's the Yasunori Mitsuda soundtrack. Been there, done that, got the time-travelling T-shirt. What separates *Sea of Stars* from the ever-increasing pile of RPGs that think they can recapture the spirit of the '90s is that it understands the difference between 'inspired by' and 'mindlessly copying something' – the game wants to be itself more than it does *Famous SNES RPG Clone #7632*.

The most obvious way it draws a line between itself and the past is through its extremely – almost excessively – well-animated world. Anything that can sway in an unseen breeze does so, and every every mundane NPC or minor story event I came across seemed to have some unique flourish I saw once and then never again. The main cast have been lavished with even more attention, allowing them to move around their gorgeous surroundings with the sort of fluidity their 1995 ancestors could only dream of. Swimming, shimmying across narrow ledges and balancing on ropes are all standard actions here, and this visual flexibility enables the world they wander through to be so much more organic than the traditional party-wide paths through supposedly fantastical environs.

Unbreakable genre rules dictate that our heroes' athletic exploration must be broken up by fights with monsters vaguely themed around the local area, although *Sea of Stars* livens up these fixed encounters with a brilliant turn taking/breaking mechanic, making it possible to severely weaken or even completely interrupt potentially devastating special attacks before they're set off – so long as I can unleash the correct combination of attribute-laden slashes and skills before their next turn comes around.

Whatever's going on I need to pay attention, as the outcome of every battle depends as much on my own

actions as it does my stats. Many of these attribute-laden slashes and skills can be enhanced or extended with a quick tap of a key, and incoming blows can be mitigated in the same way. The timing varies wildly depending on the party member in question and the skill being used, a small detail that helps to set the agile characters fond of fast flurries apart from the big bruisers.

Sadly the screen-filling bosses that often wait at the end of the game's puzzle-dusted dungeons are something of a let-down. They almost always have some sort of regenerative ability or 'hit these things to briefly make the boss vulnerable' pattern to them and they quickly become not a climactic spectacle, but a frustrating slog.

The outcome of every battle depends on my own actions and stats

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A brand-new RPG in the style of some very old ones

EXPECT TO PAY
£29.50

DEVELOPER
Sabotage Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
seaofstarsgame.co

BREEZY DOES IT

Sea of Stars includes some optional relics to help smooth over its intermittent frustrations. These allow you to tweak the game's difficulty to a certain degree, optionally reducing incoming damage, guaranteeing every regular hit is a double attack etc and they can all be bought for next to nothing very early on. I very much appreciated being able to sculpt my play experience so specifically, although I struggled to find a good reason not to use them. Fights didn't feel more strategic without them – it just took a little longer to achieve the same result.

As thoughtfully retro-modern as much of it is, the story can't quite escape the less impressive parts of RPG history. The NPCs may look pretty, but by and large only have the same shallow one-line scraps of nondescript text their genre ancestors said 30 years ago. Whatever problem the latest village has can often only be solved with a quick trip through the dungeon-like area nearby. In spite of these grumbles, there's a sincerity to the game that just about manages to hold it all together. The poisonous metahumour that tends to rear its head in retro-styled indie games is in here, but these instances tend to be some what rare.

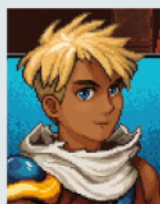
Sea of Stars is 'just' a breezy adventure in a pleasant land beset with classic RPG problems, knowing better than to stay in one place too long. The game may not reach the highest heights of the ones it draws inspiration from, but by daring to be different from not only the past but a good chunk of the present too, it comes a lot closer than most. ■

HERO 1, HERO 2 AND BOB

One of these childhood friends is not like the others



VALERE
Magic hair, supernaturally gifted, born to be the destined hero.



ZALE
Magic hair, supernaturally gifted, born to be the other destined hero.



GARL
No magic hair or supernatural gifts. A great cook and an even better friend.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Sea of Stars from Sabotage Studio offers a polished and enjoyable blend of the old and new.

79

The Brillo must eventually find an adult to help it fashion its outer layer.



Not every option available to a young whale is desirable.

BRILLO LAD

SOUTH SCRIMSHAW, PART ONE is a fascinating sci-fi docu-game

South Scrimshaw, Part One has really come out of nowhere, using a familiar framework to show something thrillingly new. It's sort of a visual novel – but forget the cutout characters and dialogue choices. No, we're being told the story of the Brillo whale – enormous whales that adorn their bodies with other sea life, in a symbiotic process – and our only choices are whether to hear more of it, when given the option.

I'm confident you will, as *Scrimshaw* guardedly reveals its fascinating backstory, which has made an ocean's worth of familiar yet different sea creatures available for scientific study. We're watching a documentary about one specific Brillo whale as he looks out with his adorable Brillo eyes, and contends with the hardships and hard choices that confront his species.

What I'm reminded of most is a David Attenborough documentary, as a narrator tells the story of the Brillo species, and optional footnotes tackle subjects related to it, to the history of the world, or the making of the documentary itself. Every line in the game is voiced, seemingly by AI software, but the slightly uncanny,

detached delivery feels like a good fit for a documentary that seems to have been aimed more at other scientists than the general public.

There's definitely an emotive element here though. From the moment he emerges from his mum's external womb, to a tense encounter with a shark, and the moment he has to choose which life to coat his outer body with, we're right there beside this shy little whale.

What I'm reminded of most is an Attenborough documentary

DEEP DIVE

The artwork is extraordinary. From the scientific cross-sections of important species to the zoomed-out portraits of the hulking whales, there's a real sense of majesty and authenticity to this aquatic society.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An interactive sci-fi documentary exploring the life cycle of the fictional Brillo whale

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Nathan O Marsh

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/ScrimshawP1

It's all static images, but there are an enormous quantity, and I'm not sure they are ever reused.

As you advance the story paragraph by paragraph, occasionally a hyperlink will appear in the text, sending you down a rabbit hole of supplementary lore. It's all as well-written and interesting as the main text, so you'd be mad not to click on every link if you're enjoying yourself, but it does give you an active hand in *Scrimshaw's* mysteries. The lore you most want to know – the deepest building blocks of this sci-fi setting – are hidden behind hyperlinks, sometimes multiple layers deep.

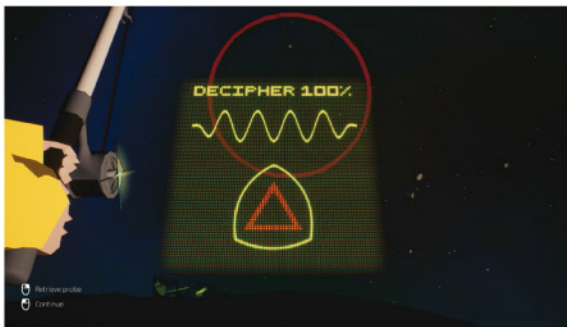
Worldbuilding is rarely this fresh or prominent in a game, but in a game about discovery it fits. We're discovering the world of the Brillo, alongside one of their number. I can't wait to see how he gets on in *Part Two*. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Scrimshaw captures the awe of the best nature documentaries, while teasing an intriguing sci-fi setting on the periphery.

86

BELOW: The planetoid is truly spherical.



MESSAGE RECEIVED

Something smells fishy in **THE ANGLERFISH PROJECT**

You've probably heard the expression 'sea of stars', but *The Anglerfish Project* takes that a step further, by giving you a fishing rod and a lure to cast into the cosmos. You take aim and cast, and if successful bring back a snippet of story, in this novel and whimsical narrative adventure.

You're Padraig, a fisherman who has swapped plaice for deep-space message recovery. Camping out a little planetoid, you have to trudge round with your fishing rod, using it to fling a probe into anomalies. Somehow, these space phenomena have recorded snippets of private chats, and a company named The Foundation wants you to Hoover all of them up. It's all in a day's work to find the anomalies as they appear in the sky, and manage your strength meter to reach them – or die trying.

I died a lot trying to learn the HUD, which does not always feel accurate when it comes to judging distance, and by 'died' I mean I murdered countless AI probes, which are essentially your fishing lures. The probes chat to you as you fish, with friendlier messages appearing as your bond grows. Lose a probe, however and you'll need to remotely incinerate little Paul to order another. New Paul is much like old Paul, fulfilling exactly the same functions, but every time one dies it forgets all about you. It becomes darkly funny to murder Paul and it neatly highlights the 'AI rights' theme of the story.

That story is funny, but feels rushed, barely scraping the surface of the interesting topic it raises. A bigger scope and a few more Pauls to murder and *Anglerfish* could be onto something special. ■

70

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Selkie Harbour

LINK
bit.ly/AnglerfishGame

PASTPORT

Back behind the desk in **LCD, PLEASE**

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Papers, Please*, developers Lucas and Keiko Pope have created a demake/spin-off that lets you control the border of glorious Arstotzka from a simple LCD screen. Well, alright, a simulated LCD screen displayed on your high-end monitor – but just look at that simulation for a moment.

I'm lucky enough to have owned some LCD games, and the accuracy of *LCD, Please* is uncanny. It's there in the bassy, bleepy sound effects, in the subtle screen glare and light screen scratches, and it understands how sprites were drawn on LCD devices. That is, everything from HUD elements to characters would permanently reserve sections of the tiny screens, even when they were not being shown.

That last one is a massive limitation, but it's not the only one, as this new take on *Papers, Please* makes do without the mouse control and simulated desk that defined how you interacted with the original game.

Gone too are many of your tools for finding discrepancies in the documents you're handed at border control – but the spirit of *Papers, Please* is present and correct. Your job is stripped down to pressing Approve or Deny, as a procession of faces appears on the screen. Does their name and face match those on their passport, are they a wanted person, do they come from a banned country? That's really all you're looking for, and you compare the data by pressing the View button at the top of the device. There's just enough of the original here to still be engaging. ■

79

BELOW: The faces are randomly generated. You can kind of tell.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Lucas and Keiko Pope

LINK
bit.ly/LCDPlease

Best thing about this shot is how entirely chill Drippy looks.



BORN DRIPPY

The magic of childhood trauma in **NI NO KUNI: WRATH OF THE WHITE WITCH**

I'd love to speak to the person on Level 5's localisation team who decided Drippy from *Ni No Kuni* should not only be Welsh, but richly, creamily, aggressively Welsh, like a male voice choir armed with longbows that fire Gavin and Stacy DVDs. It's impossible to imagine the Lord High Lord of the Fairies sounding like anyone else.

Brilliantly executed localisation is perhaps not something we associate with JRPGs. It's more common for English language versions of Japanese games to feature acting that sounds like a text-to-speech program. But this is one area where *Ni No Kuni* feels wonderfully different to other similar games, and it's a measure of the game's level of production. It feels lavish. The experienced creative hands of the Studio Ghibli team can be felt guiding everything in the background.

Elsewhere, it feels more predictable, but in a way that still manages to be effective. The quest to revive Oliver's dead mum is compelling enough, and there's a pleasant, immediately-relatable quality to the story. There's

something comforting about playing as a hopeful, pubescent hero in a magical setting that's understandable on some elemental level. It hits all the beats you expect and hope it to – magic stones, ancient sages, deliciously plump feline royalty – but it's no less enjoyable because of the traditionalism.

The quest to revive Oliver's dead mum is compelling enough

FAMILIAR AFFAIR

Ni No Kuni also feels traditional in other, less appealing ways. Narrative puzzles in the game, such as the

moment in which you have to gather surplus enthusiasm from an energetic villager to mend a sluggish guard, are explained at extreme lengths. Instead of feeling helpful, it feels patronising, like a parent explaining where the last puzzle piece should go. Shut off, mum. I'm 40. This also sits

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A high-fantasy *Pokémon* cartoon from the 1980s

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Level-5, QLOC

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/798460/Ni_no_Kuni_Wrath_of_the_White_Witch_Remastered/

awkwardly with another of *Ni No Kuni*'s JRPG tropes: the overcomplicated battle system. You command a collection of cute, weird familiars in battle, and fighting is a mix of timing, positioning, and elemental powers that echoes *Pokémon*. It can be busy in practice, but the designs are brilliantly deranged; swashbuckling cats sitting alongside more esoteric stuff, like a mushroom with narcolepsy.

After years of grim, murderous fantasy like *The Witcher* and *Game of Thrones*, there's something invigoratingly childish about *Ni No Kuni*. The structure of the story feels like it's for kids – because, y'know, it is – but the bright, relentless wholesomeness of it all makes it a difficult game not to love, even if you've reached the age where you're the person who probably needs saving by your intrepid sprog, rather than the one driving the story. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Wholesome, silly, and moving, *Ni No Kuni* is the kind of adventure that makes you feel like you're ten again.

83

BELOW: TFW you walk past Wetherspoons wearing a beret.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£8

DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

OK BOOOMERANG

Killing everyone anyone tells me to in **RAGE**

There are two plots in *Rage*. The first involves an asteroid colliding with the planet, environmental disaster, the collapse of civilisation and a brave, US marine lieutenant who awakes from stasis to help save humanity. The second is simply 'what if muscle cars plus apocalypse?'

So it's massively familiar stuff, then. The story is so rote that it almost feels like a team of great minds sat down and named everything in a way that means you never have to actually think. Sinister, technologically-advanced organisation trying to maintain control at any cost? Let's call them The Authority. Rebellious forces fighting against them? That's The Resistance. Winged stick boomerang? It's a wingstick. It's one step away from calling the protagonist Hiro Gunman. I'm not

sure if it's really clever or really stupid, but there's rarely any ambiguity or nuance here.

But it's worth reminding ourselves that this is an id game. You get loads of weapons and they all feel great. Cars go fast and are fun to drive. Missions are crisp, imaginative and surprising. The AI, too, is wonderfully irritating. Instead of enemies charging into your sights, they dink, duck and clamber, making the act of finally gunning them down even more satisfying. The driving sections are distinct enough that they almost feel like a different game altogether. Most vehicle sections in action games feel like a fussy afterthought. But *Rage*'s car sections are fun. Not quite premium paper with matching ribbons, but it doesn't look like it's been hastily mummified in bog roll, either. ■

78

CHUMBUCKET

Yes, I will be talking to you about the harpoon in **MAD MAX**

Rounding up this month's list is *Mad Max*, a game that reminds us, much like the films, that Max is actually significantly less mad than most other people in the crumbling world around him.

This is one of those titles that sits comfortably in the pantheon of beautifully average games; the 7/10 experiences you can recommend to friends even though you know they're not perfect. The story is basically a romantic comedy with cars: with the help of a disfigured mechanic called Chumbucket, Max builds a new car so he can take revenge on the people who robbed him and get his favourite ride back. Maybe he'll learn to love the new car instead? Maybe cars were actually the friends we made along the way? It honestly doesn't matter. Because all

you really need to know about *Mad Max* is that most of the bits where you're outside the car are rubbish, and all the bits when you're inside it are great. This is mostly thanks to your harpoon gun: one of those deeply-satisfying mechanics which could be a game in itself.

You can tank off bits of enemy vehicles, such as doors and armour, exposing the soft, vulnerable gas tanks. And, best of all, you can use it to pluck drivers right out of their cars; the exact middle point where slapstick comedy meets feeling like a total badass. You can eventually upgrade it to an explosive Thunderpoon, which sounds like the sort of thing you'd see written on the wall of a school toilet. Let's end this here before I spend another 200 words talking about how great the harpoon is. ■

70

BELOW: TFW you can't decide between Radio 3 and Classic FM.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Avalanche Studios

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros Games



TORMENTED SOULS II

Coming 2024

DUAL EFFECT  pqube

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PC GAMER

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

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GROUP TEST

Top PC gaming handheld consoles reviewed head-to-head.

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TECH REPORT

The technologically advanced future of sim racing.

102

TECH TALES

Can expensive sim racing hardware really make you faster on track?



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.

GROUP TEST

GAMING HANDHELDS

Carry your PC with you: handheld PC gaming has arrived, and these devices are seriously good

By Jacob Ridley

A dream shared by PC gamers everywhere has been to take our entire gaming PCs on-the-go. From LAN parties to powerful gaming laptops, we've gotten close to portable gaming nirvana, yet no solution has been quite as simple as pulling out one of

the latest generation of PC gaming handhelds and gaming from near enough anywhere.

It took a few good mobile processors to make the dream a reality. The first handhelds out of the gate were a little underpowered, then Valve made the Steam Deck and now we're all interested.







VALVE HAS COMMISSIONED ITS OWN LINUX OS, STEAMOS, TO RUN ON THE DEVICE

Deck

STEAM £349

Best value

1 The Steam Deck is the handheld device that I could only dream of as a child; a compact, cheap gaming PC that can play most of my games and slip inside a backpack. It would've hands-down bested playing on the fold-away screen atop of my Gamecube running off a 12V cigarette lighter in the back of my dad's car. In a way, the Steam Deck captures some of that retro gaming feel – it lets you find new time to play games.

I've smashed through many more games with the Steam Deck than I ever would have relying solely on my desktop.

That's true of many of these handhelds, but the Steam Deck is a very sleek experience. That's because Valve has commissioned its own Linux OS, SteamOS, to run on the device, and it's built from the ground up for gaming. It plays best with Steam games, but I've loaded the Heroic Games Launcher on it to boot into Epic and GOG games with ease, too. As a value proposition, there's really no beating the Steam Deck.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Super portable
- Great screen definition
- Battery drains quick

SPECS PROCESSOR: CUSTOM AMD 'AERITH' / RAM: 16GB LPDDR5 / SSD: 64GB, 256GB, 512GB / SCREEN SIZE: 7-INCH / RESOLUTION: 800P / OS: LINUX-BASED STEAMOS

Air 1S

AYANEO £640

Pocket-sized

2 If I was to pick an issue with the Steam Deck, it would be how chunky it is within the included carry case. The Ayaneo Air 1S is far more portable. Described as a thin and light handheld, it comes in at just 21.6mm thick and weighs only 450g. You needn't worry about its inclusion in your luggage if you're travelling long distances, as I can attest after recently taking this handheld with me to Malaysia. It comfortably fit in my carry-on luggage, making for a pleasant trip playing *Cult of the Lamb*. The 5.5-inch screen is the sacrifice you have to make for this compact size. That's a good

bit smaller than the Steam Deck's 7-inch screen, though the Air 1S has the benefit of a 1080p panel with high pixel density for an extremely crisp image.

You wouldn't think it, but the Ayaneo Air 1S is one of the more powerful handhelds in the group test. It features the same AMD Ryzen 7 7840U chip as some of the others, yet it's stuffed with 32GB of RAM and a 2TB SSD. It's a powerful PC in a form factor little bigger than a mobile phone.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Super portable
- Great screen definition
- Battery drains quick

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 7 7840U / RAM: 32GB LPDDR5 / SSD: 512GB-4TB / SCREEN SIZE: 5.5-INCH / RESOLUTION: 1080P / OS: WINDOWS 11

1



2



3



OneXFly

ONEXPLAYER £591

Balance

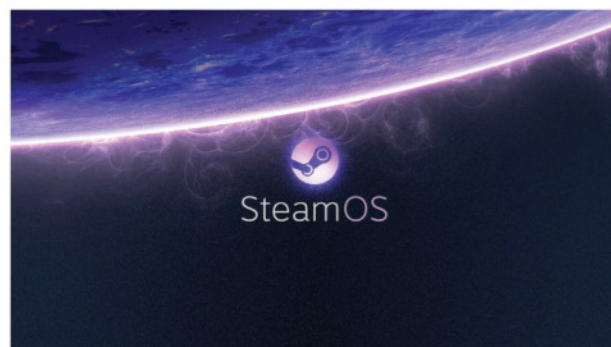
3 If you want the screen size of the Steam Deck, but like the idea of a smaller device, the OneXFly is a great middle point between the Deck and the oh-so-tiny Air 1S. It really is a gorgeous machine, with a screen bezel so slight as to make it feel like the central area is almost all panel. And it's a bright display, too, rocking a 1080p resolution with a 450 nits peak luminance level. It's also matching the 120Hz refresh rate of the ROG Ally, and that makes this one of the best-looking devices of the lot. So, good screen, a size that will slide into your day-bag, but how does it

perform? The handheld's favourite AMD 7840U APU is there, and alongside the 48Wh battery it can game at an impressive level for a decent amount of time in 30W trim. Use the OneXPlayer software and you can easily drop the TDP down to a manageable 15-20W and stretch the battery life without diminishing performance. At \$739 for the 16GB | 512GB unit it's also one of the closest to the Steam Deck's pricing, too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Beautiful design
- Tiny screen bezel
- Bright display

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 77840U / RAM: 16 - 64GB LPDDR5 / SSD: 512GB-4TB / SCREEN SIZE: 7-INCH / RESOLUTION: 1080P / OS: WINDOWS 11



LINUX VS WINDOWS

One key difference between the Steam Deck and the other handhelds in this test is Valve's choice of operating system. It uses a Linux-based OS called SteamOS, which is tailored to the handheld gaming experience and Valve's own storefront. The other handhelds use Windows, and there are benefits and drawbacks to both.

SteamOS is a very sleek experience on the Steam Deck, and if you're intent on playing games via Steam itself the overlay experience is awesome, and you'll boot right into Steam as you start the Deck up.



**A FANTASTIC SUBSTITUTE
FOR YOUR GAMING PC
WHEN YOU'RE AWAY**



A1 Pro

AOKZOE £1,087

Big boi

4 The A1 Pro is the handheld I keep going back to when I'm away from home. Straight up, I will admit it's not particularly travel-friendly in that it is rather cumbersome when you're thinking about slipping it into your carry-on for a long journey. But what makes it a winner for me is the experience when you get where you're going. With its big screen and big battery, it's a fantastic substitute for your gaming PC when you're away. And, because it's using the now-ubiquitous eight-core Ryzen 7 7840U chip, it feels slick to use in Windows and the 12CU GPU

part is very capable of surprisingly high performance gaming. It's been my *Baldur's Gate III* machine during my summer holidays this year.

With a 1920x1200 display it also has more screen real estate than most others, especially with that 8-inch expanse. That makes PC games that would be otherwise barely playable on a small screen eminently enjoyable. And it's got a huge amount of connectivity.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Chonky battery
- Big screen
- Big and weighty

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 7 7840U / RAM: 32GB LPDDR5 / SSD: 2TB / SCREEN SIZE: 8-INCH / RESOLUTION: 1200P / OS: WINDOWS 11

Ally

ROG £699

Flawed promise

5 When the ROG Ally first arrived I was rather enamoured with it. It was the first handheld I'd played with since the Steam Deck and the performance of the AMD Z1 Extreme (a custom version of the Ryzen 7 7840U with the same spec) seemed like a breath of fresh air. But since launch the longevity of its otherwise attractive design has caused concerns; namely the propensity for the placement of the SD card reader to the cooling array to kill said storage medium. It's a shame, because it's a great little device. The 1080p screen is vibrant, though with a hoofing

bezel the Deck would envy, and the thumbsticks are some of the best I've used outside of third-party Hall effect ones. I'm also impressed by the Armoury Crate software used to control all facets of the Ally. It's Asus' usual software somehow made usable in this compact PC. It allows you to adjust everything on the fly, and that means you can wring every ounce of performance and battery life out of the Ally with a few judicious tweaks.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Bright screen
- Nice thumbsticks
- Heat issues

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD Z1 EXTREME / RAM: 16GB LPDDR5 / SSD: 512GB / SCREEN SIZE: 7-INCH / RESOLUTION: 1080P / OS: WINDOWS 11



F1's official 'Arcade' events are bringing sim racing to the masses.

TRACK LIMITS

From haptics to AI, this is the future of **SIM RACING**

Sony's *Gran Turismo* movie hit cinemas this summer, telling the remarkable story of Jann Mardenborough's transition from talented sim racer to decorated racing driver. It's significant for several reasons, not least of which being the idea that a two-hour movie about gaming is now considered summer blockbuster material. But what we'll remember the most about it is that it represents that last moment such a story would be out of the ordinary. In the near future, this would just be a story about a racing driver getting his break.

F1's new generation of drivers are as well-versed and as passionate about sim racing as they are about Formula One itself. That's not hyperbole – McLaren's Lando Norris has several times gone on record to say he prefers virtual racing, and world champion Max Verstappen just this year said he thinks about sim racing more than the pinnacle of motorsport where he is currently dominating. Look at how quickly the F1 grid responded to global lockdown measures during what was going to be the 2020 Australian Grand Prix – they packed up, went home, hopped in their sim rigs and raced there instead in a livestream hosted by Veloce.

That's a serious tide shift. Sim racing isn't something you do if you can't get into motorsport, or if your interest in racing games tips over from 'passing'. As Mardenborough,

Verstappen and their generation are proving, it's now a viable route into motorsport competition.

Despite the considerable equipment cost, it's a much cheaper route than the traditional one. Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff estimated that the cost of competing in all the junior karting and open wheel category competitions usually associated with a progression into F1 is about \$8 million in 2015. Former driver Ralf Schumacher pegged the figure around \$13 million last year. Certainly puts that £1,000 force feedback wheel and a month's iRacing subscription into perspective, doesn't it?

Particularly since 2020, when sim racing saw a sharp spike in popularity, it's been legitimised as a valid route into motorsport and thus worth dropping serious coin on, among race driver hopefuls who'd otherwise be trying to bankroll £30,000 entry fees into junior karting championships and the travel and accommodations costs that come in tow. And that's good news for everyone who likes a virtual drive, because that cash injection is driving some great innovations.

SHAKER MAKER

D-Box is on the frontline of that innovation. Its haptic platforms create moveable sim racing cockpits that rumble when you drive over a kerb, pitch up when you crest a hill, throw you forwards under braking and deliver the sensation of an engine revving and tyres squirming around for torque



I Jann Legend

Jann Mardenborough, the sim racer-turned motorsport veteran whose biopic has been putting bums on cinema seats all summer, had never competed in real racing until age 19, when he got his break by winning Sony's inaugural GT Academy esports competition. Beating 90,000 others to earn the overall victory, he was awarded a Nissan race seat in the 2011 24 Hours of Dubai. He's been racing ever since, earning third place in the LMP2 category at the 2013 Le Mans 24h.



FAR LEFT: As sim racing becomes a legitimate motorsport entry point, the tech's exploding.

LEFT: *Aspetto Corsa Competizione*. If any game's worth dropping thousands on, it's this.

TRAIL BLAZERS *Games that paved the way for modern sim racing*



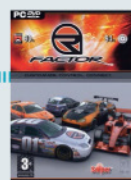
POLE POSITION 1982

Namco's arcade racer was praised at the time for unbelievably realistic handling. The cabinet featured a racing wheel.



INDIANAPOLIS 500: THE SIMULATION 1989

Probably the first racing title to adopt a hardline simulation stance.



RFACTOR 2003

The originator of the 'sim as a platform' model that encouraged modders to build whatever series they liked.



IRACING 2008

The moment when racing sims started to think seriously about league support, strict rule enforcement and esports.

underneath you. In total there are over 65,000 different haptic experiences that D-Box's G5 and G3 systems can deliver, and they're fully integrated into racing sims. D-Box's firmware reads the telemetry data being outputted by the sim, and knows which haptic routines to deliver on each of its four motion actuators.

Like so many things in this world, it's as impressive as it is expensive. The G3 system will set you back between £6,000-£8,000, depending on individual model specifications, while the cheaper G5 system with more compact actuators costs just over £4,000. The sensation is truly, without a word of hyperbole, delightful. It's somewhere between driving a car and going on a roller coaster. You're flung from side to side as you steer into corners at speed and shift the car's weight laterally, and when you stamp on the brakes you feel the panic-inducing Gs that only real track time can otherwise deliver.

The question is: does it make you any faster? F1 teams seem to think so. Simulator time has become a big part of car development in the cost cap era when wind tunnel time is strictly rationed and on-track test days all but eradicated. That's led to huge investment from the F1 paddock in their own racing simulator setups, where test drivers log significant hours virtually testing different upgrades to better understand their effect on the vehicle. Ferrari called upon Bristol-based motion simulator specialist Dynisma in 2021 to build the DMG-1 motion platform at its Maranello HQ, which sits on a hydraulic platform and features incredibly low 3-5ms lag. This is where the most famous F1 team in history tests new parts.

It wouldn't go to the trouble if it didn't think there was a benefit to its test drivers feeling those extra sensations.

FAST LEARNER

While sim racing sits at a fork in the road when it comes to display – will multi-panel OLED setups become the standard, or will VR replace screens entirely? – it's agreed that AI will prompt significant gains towards more accurate simulations.

We're already seeing it at ground level in racing games.

Milestone's *MotoGP* series and Turn 10's upcoming *Forza Motorsport* (which they've dropped the '8' from under the mistaken impression that makes it cooler) both employ neural network AI learning to inform the way your competitors race around the track. Instead of following a developer-dictated line around a circuit and inputting their throttle and brake as instructed, they're given a wealth of information about the track and vehicle and left to figure out

the best way to get round it. Like you are. It's just that the AI has driven it hundreds of thousands of times, refined its technique each time and doesn't get distracted by its phone every few laps. Good luck.

So we're already seeing more human behaviour from AI drivers, and that's making sim racing an even more valuable tool for real-world applications. And since direct drive wheels are also getting cheaper thanks to Chinese manufacturer Moza undercutting everyone and stalwarts like Fanatec and Thrustmaster forced to respond, sim racing's becoming a broader church. We don't all need to aspire to an F1 drive or drop £100k on a rig – we all get to enjoy more realistic racing.

Phil Iwanik

**DOES IT MAKE
YOU ANY FASTER?
F1 TEAMS SEEM
TO THINK SO**

CHASING GHOSTS

Can **SIM RACING HARDWARE** really make you faster?

Lockdown brought out many strange habits in us all. Frenzied walking around parks. Giving ourselves haircuts. All the endless bloody baking. And for me and my mates, a renewed enthusiasm for Slightly Mad Studios' 2017 racing sim, *Project CARS 2*. While the world was laugh-crying at the hilarious antics of those colourful little beans in *Fall Guys* and shouting at *Phasmophobia*'s ghosts, we whiled away what for all we knew was the apocalypse by adjusting radiator cooling ducts and rake angles.

I'm exaggerating for effect. Obviously we played all of those in-vogue titles too, but *Project CARS 2* was the one that stuck. It was so malleable, so sandboxy for a racing sim. I created 100-lap Indycar oval races in the snow with x60 day-night cycles. I made us all race Monaco in karts in the dead of night.

Every night there was some new, intensely gruelling and unintentionally hilarious combination of car, track and conditions to explore. And every night, in every single one of those scenarios, the same person crossed the line in P1: the only one of us who was using a wheel.

This soul-eroding circumstance proved the ideal test conditions for a hypothesis we've all posited: how much faster does sim racing gear make us, and at what point on the sliding scale of expensive equipment do the returns become too diminished? Time to dust off the force feedback wheel and find out.

ATTEMPT ONE

My first stab at this was low effort. An old Logitech G27 wheel and pedals from long before the words 'direct drive' entered widespread awareness. It's an old classic, a belt-and-gear based force feedback wheel whose latency and detail leaves something to be desired by modern standards. But trust me, this thing was the last word in sim racing in 2011. Immediately, I noticed certain advantages. Where

before my car would become unbalanced through S-bends like the Red Bull Rings's turns 7 and 8 because I had to quickly move the thumbstick from full right to full left, it was suddenly easy to keep the car stable with the wheel and I could carry more speed through flip-flop sections as a result. In the aforementioned Red Bull Ring, that was worth half a second versus my best lap with a pad.

The wheel and pedals' other advantages made themselves clear as I put in the laps. Since it's a lot easier to modulate throttle and brake inputs with nice big pedals and their massive amounts of travel than it is using a controller's triggers, I could remove all assists and negate any lost time from over-zealous traction control. Once again, I found another three tenths easily.

Plus, the brake pedal has a strong resistance to it so you can find the biting point much more easily. That means fewer lock-ups, and opens up

the potential to trail-brake further into corners with minimal brake pressure. Again, I found a tenth here and there with each new lap.

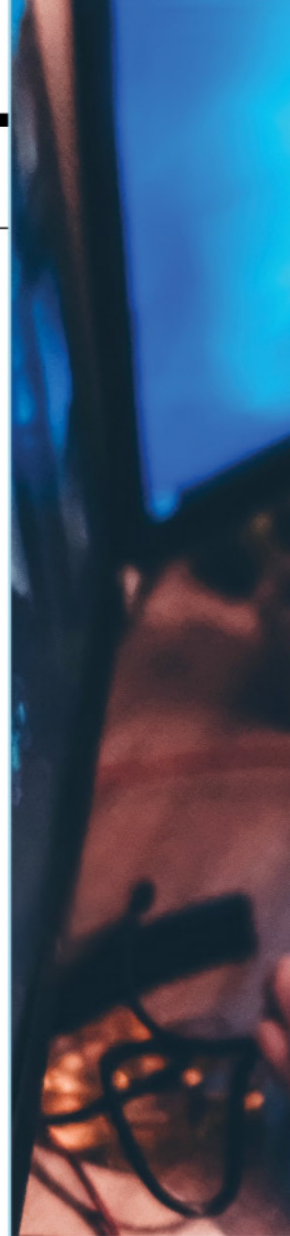
And then I stopped finding new time. With my good friend's ghost still 0.7sec in front of me each lap, I simply stopped improving, as if I'd hit the limits of my ability with disappointing rapidity and abruptness. So I headed back to the setup screen.

And I realised that I needed to completely change my vehicle setup to accommodate for this different input method. Soft, forgiving suspension that I needed with a pad was slowing me down and feels too vague with a wheel. I could get away with much less downforce, because the handling was so much less twitchy now with 900 degrees of rotation and some meaty force feedback conveying how planted the tyres are at every stage. Then I saved my setup and went to bed.

ATTEMPT TWO

The next day I was working in the office. One of the fringe

THE WHEEL AND PEDALS' OTHER ADVANTAGES MADE THEMSELVES CLEAR



PHIL IWANIUK
Automotive 'expert' Phil Iwaniuk realised that the spaces in car parks are all the same size late into his 20s. Nearly killed former deputy art editor Andy in a karting accident.

THIS SPRAWL OF MINE *Four alternatives to Project CARS 2*



F1 23

The all-new F1 World mode has a surprising variety of online events. Hotlap leaderboards are still the main event though.



ASSETTO CORSA

Gives you total control over track conditions, rules and race formats. And if you can think of a car, someone's made that mod.



AUTOMOBILISTA 2

An incredibly versatile sim racing platform cut from the rFactor mould – extremely modder-friendly and malleable.



FORZA MOTORSPORT

Turn 10's upcoming racer has an impressively huge car and track list. We should get years of online battles out of it.



benefits of my job is that we have bucket seats, projector screens and sim racing gear everywhere, and so naturally rather than going home that evening I stuck around, installed *Project CARS 2* on a work PC and sought to discover what a direct drive wheel and a proper seating position might get me at Red Bull Ring.

What I found was exactly what I'd expected: I was more comfortable, and I was probably having more fun. But I wasn't faster. The lap times weren't tumbling down just because I had some more information going into my hands from a direct drive servo. After two hours I'd found two tenths, and I suspected I'd have probably found at least that much at home just through sheer practice.

The lesson, then? Marginal gains. Taking the jump into a wheel setup does offer significant advantages to a controller, but the price-performance graph doesn't increase exponentially. In fact, in my experience, it tapered very soon. I eventually beat my mate's best time at Red Bull Ring. He loaded the game that same evening and beat my new time by half a second. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



ABOVE: Typical race conditions in *Project CARS 2*. When I'm running the server.

FAR LEFT: Motion rigs and triple-screen setups are fun.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

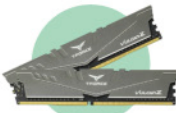
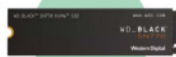
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,058

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £199 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4060 Nvidia £288 One of the cheaper ways to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £40 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £91 We have to run a 550W PSU for the RTX 4060, as per Nvidia's recommendations.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £35 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £145 You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £49 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,532

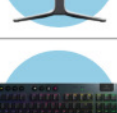
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £177 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £199 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £430 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £Free Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £36 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 650W Be Quiet! £107 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity.
SSD		WD Black SN770 1TB Western Digital £42 There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £49 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £47 Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £85 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,199

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £715 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £669 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,500 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £155 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £118 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850X 2TB Western Digital £110 You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive.
DATA DRIVE		Crucial P5 Plus 2TB Crucial £96 This isn't quite as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.
CASE		5000D Corsair £140 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF) Alienware £929 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £149 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £120 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £158 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I feel like I’m playing with the kind of unhinged DM I’d be very wary of”

Breaking D&D taboos in **BALDUR’S GATE III**

Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition has plenty of written rules – but it’s got its fair share of unwritten ones, too.

These days, there are tabletop taboos that are simply not broken in polite company. The thing is, *Baldur’s Gate III* breaks pretty much all of them.

It goes without saying that *Baldur’s Gate III* is an exceptional RPG, and for my money the best adaptation yet of D&D to the digital realm. But there’s definitely some friction between Larian’s well-honed approach to RPG design, and what a 5e player might expect.

In the early history of D&D, absurdly lethal traps were a staple – at some tables, you’d keep a stack of spare characters next to you, ready to swap in when you pressed the wrong

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Took a lot of Long Rests in dungeons.

ALSO PLAYED
Starfield, Persona 5 Royal

button or opened the wrong door. The modern game, however, with its focus on building characters and story-driven adventure, strongly discourages dropping such deadly dangers on your party.

YOU’RE FIRED

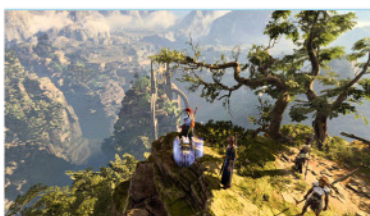
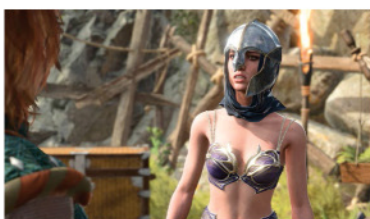
That hasn’t dissuaded Larian, however. Traps in *Baldur’s Gate III* instead carry on the approach of the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Exploring my first *Baldur’s Gate III* dungeon I open an ornate coffin and instantly there’s oil around my feet

TOP: Honestly I’d love to see Wizards of the Coast come up with an encounter as deliciously messed up as Auntie Ethel.

and flaming arrows flying. In the context of the kind of games Larian creates, it makes sense – I reload my save, and get to work figuring out how I can get around this obstacle. But I’m struck by how distant such a moment feels from any that Wizards of the Coast would include in a modern D&D campaign book.

Even getting to that trap required fighting my way through an overwhelming group of bandits – flying in the face of modern D&D sensibilities about encounter balance. Cheesing my way through it meant exploiting the game’s surfaces and elemental effects, themselves the

IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF D&D, ABSURDLY LETHAL TRAPS WERE A STAPLE



kind of additions that would be seen as ill-advised house rules at tables.

That's not even getting into the game's many OP magic items no DM would dream of handing out to a low-level party; its frequent inclusion of flirting and sex, which most tables handwave or avoid entirely; or its plot that literally invades the character's brains, messing with player agency in a way that's been considered dangerous ground in tabletop role-playing for decades.

What's interesting to me is that, though *Baldur's Gate III* is in many ways extremely faithful to D&D 5e as a system, at the same time it is very much its own interpretation of the game, with a tone and style that would actually be at odds with how the majority of the community plays. Partly that is just because it's a videogame rather than a written campaign, but there is more to it than that. It's clear that there are things Larian is simply more interested in than Wizards of the Coast – things like giving players big surprises in play, and encouraging creative, strange solutions to seemingly impossible problems.

That it works so well is perhaps a sign that tabletop D&D could stand to be a little more flexible in 2023. ■



Behold my bounty-hunting garb and ship.

“It’s going to be a pleasant morning”

Why explore **STARFIELD** when I can sari shop instead?

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Bought a totally fetch sari.
Finally made fetch happen.

ALSO PLAYED
Baldur's Gate III, *Quake 2*

My spaceship is serviced, painted and its engines are primed for take-off. My hired crew member, Marika, is chipper and raring to go hunt some bounties. And my armoury of weapons now includes a Rapidshot tactical shotgun, Furious Orion laser rifle and, what can only be described as a lethal Ashta Tamer explosive projectile launcher. I'm cocked, locked and ready to rock *Starfield's* Settled Systems.

But instead, I'm picking out a fetch green sari from EIT Clothiers in New Atlantis, and afterwards I'm going to wear it, grab a coffee, and then go stroll around the leafy, wooded parkland in the city's Mast District. It's going to be a pleasant morning.

Because after the barrage of hype surrounding *Starfield*, I'm trying to take my foot of the gas a bit and just play this game as casually as possible. I'm trying to not take it too seriously and not get too invested in it, playing it here and there as a kind of second life inhabit-em-up, with a bit of adventuring on the side.

My character, Violar, looks fantastic in the sari, too, and as I

perch on my bar stool looking like a million dollars while sipping my Manhattan, I muse that she's not the only thing that looks so good. By *The Great Serpent*, Bethesda has done a super job of making many of *Starfield's* planets and locations look great, with the latest iteration of its Creation Engine seemingly squeezed to its limit to great effect. Discovering and wandering around on alien worlds frequently looks spectacular.

ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS

But equally, those less-than-optimal things that our *Starfield* review calls out this issue really have quelled my enjoyment of this game so far, too. Inventory management is a terrible and frequent drag, space-based ship combat finickity and, despite the frequently gorgeous vistas, I've yet to experience one truly memorable quest. Plus, why isn't there even a basic map for major locations?

So, yes, my takeaway from playing *Starfield* right now? Don't take anything too seriously. Enjoy the game for what it does deliver and try not to get frustrated about what it clearly doesn't. Have a drink, relax, and imagine another life in far away star system. ■



“I’ve made the fatal mistake of playing this game like an utter goblin”

A continuously frustrating quest to get good at **TEKKEN 7**

I recently returned home from competing in my first *Tekken 7* major, which means I’m in that post-tournament training stage. I still suck pretty bad at the game. I don’t compete in these things to win, I compete to be around my friends, other like-minded people and, most critically, receive instant feedback on how I play.

So now I’m taking the constructive criticism I received at the tournament – my impatience, lack of matchup knowledge, pressing buttons when I shouldn’t be – and trying to apply it back home. Yeah, turns out you can’t just mash buttons at these things. Who’d have thought?! I’ve also picked up a new character since my main, Lucky Chloe, seemingly isn’t making it into *Tekken 8*. Truly heartbreaking stuff.

All’s well though, because I have Claudio Serafino to fall back on. He’s cool looking, relatively simple and he’s in *Tekken 8*. Gone are my days of playing low-tier waifu trash. I’m all about those simple but strong husbandos now, baby.

MOLLIE TAYLOR



THIS MONTH
Got my butt kicked live on stream in front of thousands

ALSO PLAYED
Baldur’s Gate III, *It Takes Two*

THE NEXT BATTLE

Well, uh, turns out learning a new character is kinda tough. Hell, *Tekken 7* is a difficult game in general. Move lists are lengthy, movement is difficult but integral to skilful play, and there are around 50 characters who you have to learn how to play against. It’s a total information overload in your first few hundred hours, trying to make every moving part work together in harmony.

I hop into the training mode and pick up a few combos, practising them over and over while simultaneously trying to hammer the

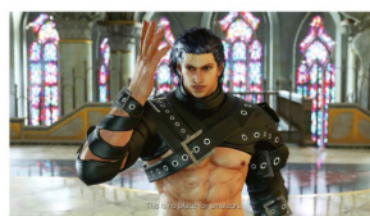
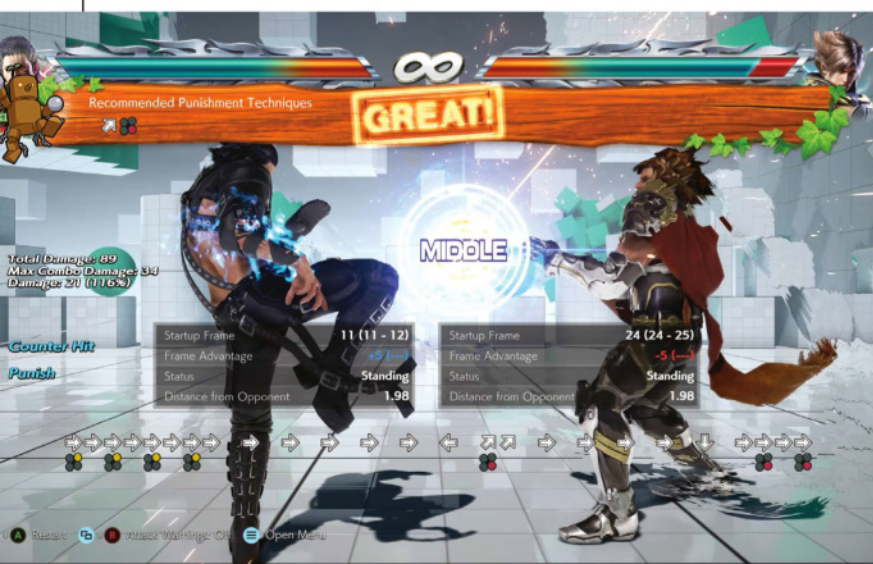
WELL, UH, TURNS OUT LEARNING A NEW CHARACTER IS KINDA TOUGH

Lucky Chloe inputs out of my skull. My time learning one character has set up the foundations brilliantly for easily picking up a new fighter. At least, that’s what I thought.

It turns out I’ve made the fatal mistake of playing this game like an utter goblin for the last 70 hours. I’ve been out-cheesing my opponents left and right, but Claudio is far too sensible for such nonsense.

I’m losing a lot more right now, but I’m also learning how to play *Tekken* better. I’m learning how to command the space around me, inching out of the way of my opponent’s move so I can dive in with a whiff punish and deal damage. I’m learning patience, and when it’s my turn to dish out a few hits.

I’m also trying to remind myself I still have less than 100 hours in this game, and learning good movement and how to read your opponent takes a helluva long time. Fighting games are tough, and taking them seriously can often be an exercise in frustration. That’s what makes them so damn satisfying, though. Besides, I’ve yet to go out of a tournament without a single win so I must be doing something right, huh? ■



FAR LEFT: *Tekken* isn’t just pressing buttons – it’s knowing when and what to press.

BELOW: Losing so magnificently in front of thousands has pushed me to my next great training arc.





“I’ve conquered – well, not quite everything, but quite a lot”

Dealing thunder and death in **NAPOLEON: TOTAL WAR**

What makes Napoleon a compelling subject? Is it that he came from nothing and conquered everything? Or is it the fear he inspired in his opponents? “My enemies are many, my equals are none,” he declares in Creative Assembly’s sixth *Total War*.

Through my clicks and taps I embody the general himself in the game’s opening Italian campaign, the first of several following Napoleon’s career. It’s April, 1796, and I’ve assumed control of a stalled invasion of Northern Italy aimed at Vienna. The map is a close view of the region, which contrasts with the globe-spanning schemes of its predecessor Empire. If sceptics don’t like the difference in scale, I’d point to the texture it brings: regions which barely register in Empire stretch across the screen. Turns represent not months but weeks. Beneath *Total War*’s UI are maths governing the obstacles thrown your way, and Napoleon’s trick is to introduce attrition due to heat and snow,

KYLE HOEKSTRA



THIS MONTH
Came from nothing, conquered (not quite) everything.

ALSO PLAYED
Cyberpunk 2077

meaning replenishment has to be considered in advance.

I’m supposed to carve a supply route, but my first action is to confront fusiliers lingering near the French Riviera. Battles are decorous affairs, involving preened and shrewdly arranged soldiers advancing in choreographed manoeuvres, right up to the deciding *mêlées*. When the battlefield is wreathed in gunpowder smoke, artillery is scoring lines through columns and cuirassiers are charging, there are glimpses of the

MY FIRST ACTION IS TO CONFRONT FUSILIERS NEAR THE FRENCH RIVIERA

spectacular 1970 Italian-Soviet film Waterloo which had 15,000 extras.

FORCE OF NATURE

I capture cities, build roads, recruit troops and establish supply posts – an army marches on its stomach, as someone said. By December 1796, with snow whitening the Dolomites, I’ve allied with Venice and Lucca and conquered a lot. Venice may have reneged the following turn, but I’m on the warpath: in vengeance I crush Verona. With a campaign deadline looming, I send everything I’ve got to the front. Habsburgs are dispatched in alpine valleys and Venice is subdued. Eventually Klagenfurt is, too, with Napoleon’s army at the lead.

Genre conventions leave little room for non-military matters, and arguably the strategy game invites fewer questions about Napoleon’s lust for power. All the same, the entry set a precedent for deeper campaign experiences in the franchise, and might be seen as a benchmark against which more recent offerings like *Troy* and *Pharaoh* can be measured. ■

REMNANT 2

Reloaded with quality of life improvements. *By Harvey Randall*

If I wasn't suffering a chronic case of *Baldur's Gate III* brain this autumn, *Remnant 2* would have absorbed every waking moment instead. Even my brief vacations from the Sword Coast mostly involved rootin', tootin', and/or shooting my way through Gunfire Games' surprise hit.

Granted, if you played the first game, you might not be all that surprised. It was a little third-person multiversal *Souls*-like where you shot your way through a grim-but-beautiful interpretation of the many-worlds theory. The sell being 'there are worlds out there, they're just as screwed as ours is. Shoot things.' Its sequel has done well because it's pretty much just the first game, but better. I'm thoroughly enamoured.

It's good enough, in fact, that the thorns in its procedurally arranged rose are far more noticeable because of it. Performance issues, an over-reliance on upscaling, and stingy currency rewards on launch started a clock on Gunfire Games to patch things up before it lost its goodwill. Fortunately, the fix-up's came quick. Less than one month after its launch, a series of patches in August saw most complaints dealt with.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 2023

DEVELOPER
Gunfire Games

PUBLISHER
Gearbox Publishing

LINK
remnantgame.com

SCRAP ECONOMICS

Let's talk money. *Remnant 2* initially leant way too heavily on a single resource, its basic currency scrap. You had to use scrap for everything – weapon mods, weapon mutators, weapons themselves, rings, consumables, alternate class unlocks, respeccing orbs – you had to gather a mountain of trash to feed Ward 13's hungry merchants, and if you didn't, you were screwed.

This made the game's first few hours feel stingy. There was this ever-present looming dread of 'did I mess up my build?' every time I upgraded a weapon. This especially stung if my new investment didn't hit as hard as I wanted.

August's barrage of patches helped to fix that. Firstly, they gave a big bump to passive scrap generation, giving you more bang for your bolt at every chest. They also tossed some major scrap sinks – for instance, unlocking alternate classes used to cost 1,000 scrap, now it costs 0.

The game's respec item – the Orb of Undoing – also used to be a

consumable that cost 2,500 scrap a pop. So if you wanted to adjust your trait points, you had to either already be at the end-game or you had to bankrupt yourself. One player even wound up discovering a glitch where they could dodge-cancel the animation to keep the orb in their inventory. Well, Gunfire Games saw that bug and went, "Now it's a feature". You still have to buy the Orb, but it's a one-time purchase for infinite respects.

On the less financial side of things, building new characters is now way easier – the game's got this nifty dual-class archetype system. Classes level independently as you play, and are linked to items named engrams,

UNLOCKING ALTERNATE CLASSES USED TO COST 1,000 SCRAP

which you equip to become that archetype – and you can hold two. Unlocking an archetype typically involves a very involved scavenger hunt or puzzle. For example, the Archon archetype was so hidden away that it spawned a Discord server called the Cult of the Door, forcing players to datamine up a specific set of equipment to unlock it.

On release, when you crafted a new engram, you could start as that archetype when you made a new character. Again, rose, meet thorn – any archetypes you didn't start as would still make you do these quests again to reclaim them. Luckily, the August patches fixed that as well. As a patch note states, "If you can start with it, Wallace will sell it." While the initial selection of archetypes in the game is limited, the actual build possibilities are massive – so this is a huge improvement for experimenting with weird builds on alts.

It's comparing apples to oranges to some extent, but I can't help but think about *Diablo IV*. At the time of writing, that game still doesn't have a comprehensive loot filter, which is industry standard for ARPGs. Meanwhile, Gunfire Games released a solid *Souls*-like – then very quickly set to work addressing the player's complaints. Obviously, *Remnant 2* is technically a smaller game – but damn it if it doesn't feel like us fans ate good this year. ■

MYSTIC WALLACE'S WHACKY DEALS

You won't believe these prices!



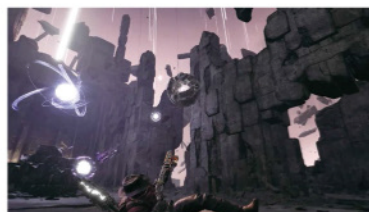
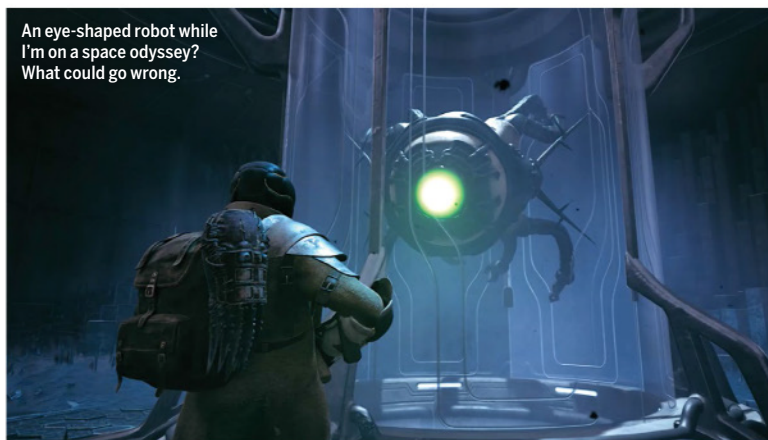
UNLOCKING AN ARCHETYPE
Now just one engram and ten lumenite crystals!

RESPECCING YOUR CHARACTER
Buy one orb, get infinite orbs free – no tricks, no traps, no stress!

RECLAIMING ARCHETYPES
For the low, low price of 1,500 scrap, your previously-unlocked archetypes are yours to keep!

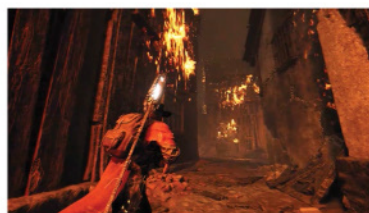


An eye-shaped robot while I'm on a space odyssey? What could go wrong.



LEFT: It is not advisable to ponder this orb.

BELOW: Nothing unusual here, just your bog-standard room full of orphans with a spinning wheel.



This world lost its way on its own. Lost sight of what mattered. Change was inevitable.



BALDUR'S GATE III

Mods for one of the best RPGs. *By Christopher Livingston*

Stop me if you've heard this one. You and your party of adventurers are running around some dimly lit cavern or sneaking through a crumbling temple or entering a spooky, abandoned little town. It's quiet. A little too quiet. Surely, not everything is as it seems.

Then you hear a sound: a dice roll. It's a perception check, and you've failed it! Your entire party, in fact, one by one, has completely failed to spot... well, something. So, you stop in your tracks because even though you didn't notice anything, you did notice that you didn't notice anything. It's pretty funny to fail a perception check, but it can be a little immersion-breaking, too.

That doesn't just happen in Dungeons & Dragons when your DM rolls a few dice behind the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 2023

PUBLISHER
In-house

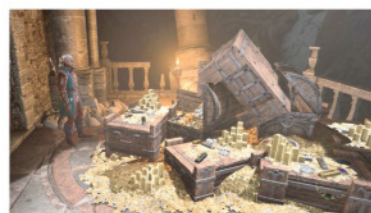
DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

LINK
baldursgate3.game

screen and then refuses to tell you what they were checking for, it also happens in *Baldur's Gate III*. But now there's a mod to fix that and keep the immersive experience of simply not knowing that you missed something. The mod is called *Failed Perception Check Hider*, which means when you fail that roll you will have no idea the roll even took place. The mod was created by TheComposerMods, and it's just one of a whole bunch of mods that have sprung up in just a few weeks since *Baldur's Gate III* arrived.

CHEATING AT DICE

The RPG from Larian Studios is



LEFT: Nvidia's accountant appraises profits after releasing the RTX 40 series.

ABOVE: Defo getting a Kiss Psycho Circus vibe here.



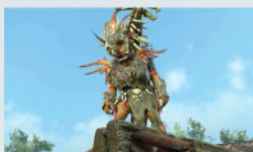
FLING THINGS

A few of the best throwable items



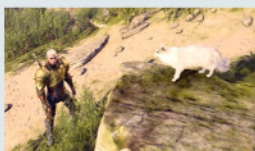
A BOTTLE OF WATER

At your friends. It'll clean the blood and mud right off them.



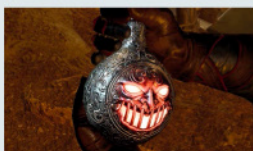
A GOBLIN

Throw it at a different goblin. Surprisingly effective!



A CAT

But only if it's a druid wild-shaped into a cat and you need to get it up to a ledge.



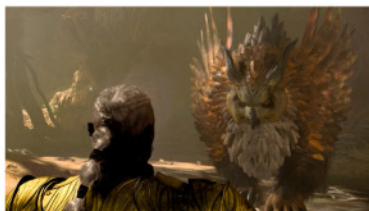
THIS MYSTERIOUS GRINNING BOTTLE

I'm not sure what's in it, but I'm sure gonna throw it at someone.



FAR LEFT: Now you can fail to spot this giant dragon without knowing you've failed.

ABOVE: Fancy every single weapon in the game in a barrel? Well, now you can.



huge, enthralling, and fantastic... but it isn't perfect, and modders have been adding their own tweaks, changes, and fixes. Many of them, as you might expect, are based around making the game a little easier. In some cases, a lot easier. Cheating, in other words – not that there's anything wrong with that.

Baldur's Gate III doesn't have traditional cheats or a dev console to enter commands into (at least not yet), but modders are filling the gap nicely. For example, if you're playing on the easiest difficulty, Explorer, you can't make your characters multiclass. I'm not sure what the reason is for that restriction, but the *Multiclass Unlocker* mod (also by TheComposerMods) does away with it. Multiclass to your heart's content. Another mod called *Bags Bags* by Liareth adds 21 different containers to help keep your inventory more manageable. There's a scroll case, a potion pouch, and separate bags for jewellery, gloves and boots, armour and clothing, and all the other assorted junk you collect that can be a bit hard to sort through.

CARRY WEIGHT

And then there are mods for some serious cheats. The *Fast XP* mod simulates an extremely generous dungeon master by giving you double XP for either the entire game or at least up until you hit level 5. There's also a *Carry Weight Increased* mod which means you can really stuff your pockets with loot, and has several options depending on how easy you want to make things on yourself – including a setting that lets you carry 9,000 times the weight you normally can. That seems a bit... overboard, but many mods are.

Typically you only gain new feats about once every four levels, ensuring you don't turn from an adventurer into a superhero, but a mod called *Feat Every Level Up* gives you a new feat, well, every single time you level up. Just imagine using this mod alongside the double XP mod – it won't be long before you're more of a god than an adventurer.

And if you really want an advantage in combat, you can tip the odds in your favour with the *Party Limit Begone* mod. It really doesn't

make a lot of sense that you can only travel with three companions at a time – and just because Wyll is a bit of a bore he shouldn't be punished by just chilling back at camp while you're out saving the world. I mean, Captain America didn't pick his three favourite Avengers when he went to take on Thanos. He rolled with his whole crew. So, this mod does away with that illogical four-character party limit. Now you can travel the world with up to eight characters at once. That temple full of goblins won't stand a chance.

Want to pull out all the stops? A mod called *All Items* adds a barrel to your camp filled with every weapon and piece of armour in the game. Yeah, that's quite a big cheat.

CONTROL SCHEMES

A few more mods feel a little less like



THEN THERE ARE MODS FOR SOME SERIOUS CHEATS

cheats and more like quality of life improvements. If you're a fan of MMOs, the *WASD Character Movement* mod lets you control your character's directly with your keyboard instead of your mouse – and you don't even need to use WASD, you can pick your own keys. It even has an auto-run option, and some tweaks to the camera really give *Baldur's Gate III* the feel you get cruising around in an MMO.

And for those of you who (like me) find it a little difficult managing all the options that come with controlling four different characters in combat, the *Lone Wolf* mod attempts to replicate the Lone Wolf perk from another Larian game: *Divinity: Original Sin 2*. That perk gave you more actions if you were playing alone or with only a single companion, and boosted your HP and armour. This mod for solo players doubles your main and bonus actions, doubles the XP earned, gives you additional spell slots and sorcery points, increases your carrying capacity, and even raises your level cap from 12 to 20. That will certainly make it easier to tackle the dangerous world all on your own. ■



BECOME LEGENDARY

Grab Baldur's Gate III's rarest gear. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

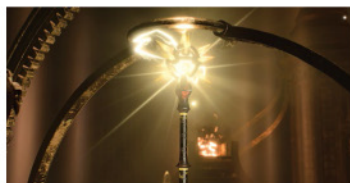
TIME
50 hours

VITAL LINKS

Find legendary items:
shorturl.at/qxBY7

Win Wheel of Wonders:
shorturl.at/AET59

Complete the Wyrmsway:
shorturl.at/dmq03



BLOOD OF LATHANDER

1 If you want to bash people over the head with a veritable holy relic, you can find the Blood of Lathander in the Githyanki Creche in the Mountain Pass. This glowy mace can also heal you if you get downed, though be mindful of nasty surprises when you first loot it.



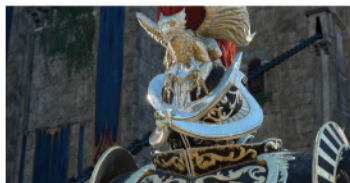
NYRULNA

2 Nyrulna is a throwable thunder trident that cannot be dropped, meaning it returns to your hand every time you hurl it. Its Veil of Wind ability also makes you immune to all fall damage. Win Akabi's Wheel of Wonders in the Circus of the Last Days during Act 3 to get it.



MARKOHESHKIR

3 The best staff in *Baldur's Gate III* allows you to cast a free spell, while also providing extra resistance through its Kereska's Favour ability. If your Gale is anything like mine, having some extra survivability will help a lot. Markoheshkir is found in Ramazith's Tower.



GONTR MAEL

4 This Legendary bow has a chance to inflict Guiding Bolt on enemies you hit, making it the perfect weapon for focus-firing big bads, while Celestial Haste grants you super speed. You'll have to defeat the Steel Watcher Titan boss in the Lower City to loot this one.



BALDURAN'S GIANTSAYER

5 What about a giant-slaying greatsword that also turns you into a giant? Balduran's Giantslayer is real good at killing bigfolk, but you become equally big with its Giant Form ability. Grab this one by defeating Ansur in the Wyrmsway.



DUELIST'S PREROGATIVE

6 If you're playing a rapier-wielding scoundrel, Duelist's Prerogative is likely your ideal Legendary. You gain an additional reaction in combat when using it, and if your off-hand is empty, rolling a 19 lands a critical hit.



THE ORPHIC HAMMER

7 Though this hammer is mainly important for narrative reasons, it's still a half-decent Legendary weapon, since its Unshackling Strike ability can free Restrained, Paralysed, or Stunned allies. Make a deal with Raphael in Wyrms Crossing to get this hammer.

GOOD BOOKS *Peruse these powerful tomes*



1

THE RED KNIGHT'S FINAL STRATAGEM

This is the first of three Legendary books you can find in the Sorcerous Vault below Sorcerous Sundries in the Lower City.

2

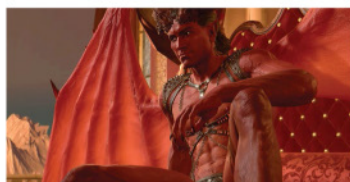
THE ANNALS OF KARSUS

The second Legendary book is hidden behind the Karsus door in the Sorcerous Vault. Reading this book gives you the level five Scroll of Dethrone.

3

THE THARCIATE CODEX

The final Legendary book is behind the Elminster door. This one allows you to finish the Necromancy of Thay.



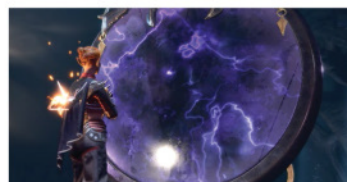
HELLDUSK ARMOUR

8 Speaking of Raphael; if you kill the devil you can loot his Legendary Helldusk Armour. This set gives you amazing fire resistance and grants you Fly as a bound spell. Better still, you don't need heavy armour proficiency to use it, so you can spend that Feat elsewhere.



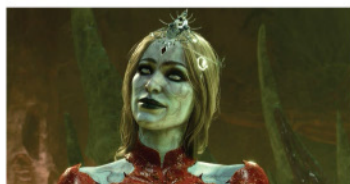
SPEAR OF THE NIGHT

9 You'll get this weapon in the Gauntlet of Shar during Act 2, but it actually changes into a specific Legendary depending on the outcome of Shadowheart's quest. Either way, it's a good weapon for the cleric, providing a powerful bound spell.



VICINIA'S WALKING FORTRESS

10 Vicinia's Walking Fortress replaces the usual Shield Bash reaction with Rebuke the Mighty; an ability that also deals force damage. Reflective Shell lets you send projectiles back at their owners when active.



CRIMSON MISCHIEF AND BLOODTHIRST

11 Orin's twinned shortsword and dagger are pretty brutal if you're a dual-wielder. They deal additional piercing damage, but Bloodthirst also allows you to retaliate with a True Strike riposte if an enemy misses you.



GLOVES OF SOUL CATCHING

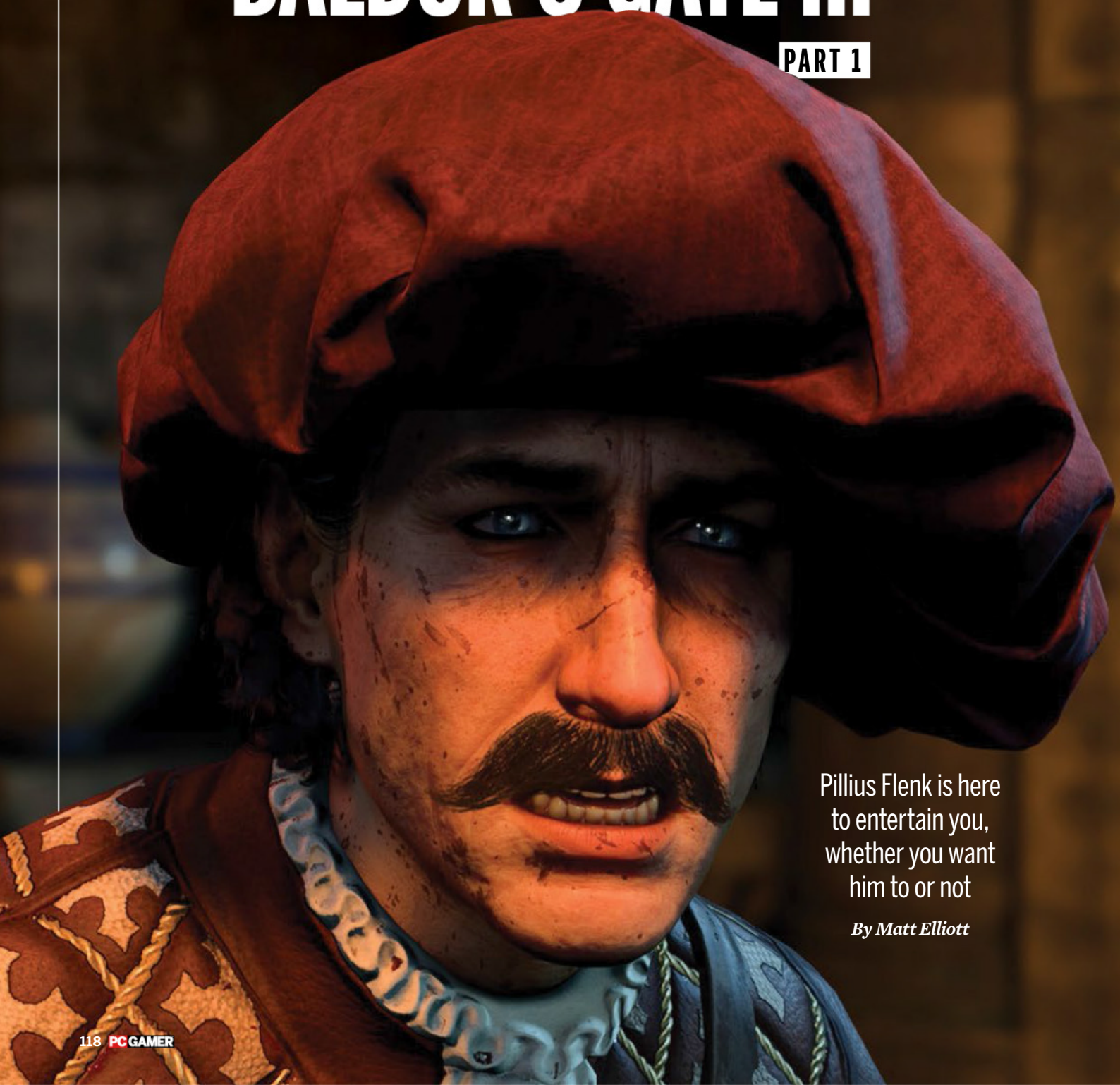
12 These magical gloves add extra force damage to unarmed attacks and once per turn can either heal you, or give you advantage on attack rolls. They are a reward for saving Hope from the House of Hope.



HAVE A GO IF YOU THINK
YOU'RE BARD ENOUGH IN

BALDUR'S GATE III

PART 1



Pillius Flenk is here
to entertain you,
whether you want
him to or not

By Matt Elliott

I've decided I no longer want to be a hero. Through a lifetime spent playing games I've amassed a swollen backlog of tedious do-gooders. And, at the same time, there's nothing attractive about being nakedly evil: it's vulgar, unfulfilling, and usually quite stressful. Thankfully, the complexity of *Baldur's Gate III* offers richer possibilities. In an act of pure arrogance, I decide to cast a protagonist in my own mould, with all the same distracting inadequacies. He'll be an inveterate coward who is somehow a people-pleaser, and grotesquely self absorbed at the same time. He'll agree to anything to make himself look dashing, then go to despicable lengths to avoid actually doing it.

It's important he looks right. In the end, I settle on the combined qualities of Lord Farquaad from *Shrek*, Humperdinck from the *Princess Bride*, and a barista who sighs when you order a chai latte. I think about giving him an honorary title, which he neither earned nor inherited. This is based on a story I once read about a druid who tricked out his pet with deception skills and tuxedo then renamed him Sir Bearington. I realise, however, that I don't know enough about D&D lore to pick an appropriate honorific. Instead I call him Pillius Flenk; a name that sounds partly like something your dad would call you for shining the torch in the wrong direction while he's drilling, and partly like a type of parasite. Pillius Flenk is the sort of man who agrees to play at your wedding then reveals on the day that he only does acoustic covers of Insane Clown Posse songs. He is, magnificently, a bard.

THE RULES

1. You need to be adored. Say yes to everything.
2. Do everything possible to avoid actual physical confrontation.
3. Thrill your party by performing a song during every fight.

BARD TARGET

Pillius' journey begins at the start of *Baldur's Gate III*. If you've tried it, you'll know that it takes a while to get going. There's a lot of nautiloid before you get to the nice. At first I plan on scurrying through the opening as fast as possible, but I realise it's an excellent opportunity to learn who Pillius truly is. Unlike me, he's useful: stealthy, charming, and deft. I decide that these skills, however, can only be used in the pursuit of self-preservation or braggadocio. Anything approaching genuine heroism counts should be considered a personal failure

My first challenge comes when I meet the chipper brain monster in the opening moments of the game. I have no desire to save it. And it could eventually be a danger to me. But it appears to be a sentient creature. At least, it's sentient enough for Pillius to crave its approval. Flenk's nimble fingers come in handy when prizing said brain out of a mutilated skull, and I have my first of many adoring party members.

It soon gets more complicated. We meet Lae'zel, a furious githyanki fighter with whom Flenk teams up, more out of a sense of self-preservation than anything else. If the monsters are busy fighting her, it leaves more

WE MEET LAE'ZEL, A FURIOUS GITHYANKI FIGHTER WITH WHOM FLENK TEAMS UP

time for Pillius to lurk at the back, hurling insults and playing his lyre. It's around now that I decide what kind of fighter Flenk is. Yes, he carries a rapier, but this is because a) it looks dashing and b) so he can jab anyone who gets too close to him. I decide that sprinting into close combat will always be against the rules. Instead, Flenk's approach to fighting involves being as far away from danger as possible, while still close enough to hurl withering insults at his enemies. Lae'zel might soften up foes with her sword, but it's Flenk calling them a "threadbare chimp-lackey" that finishes them off. He's the RPG equivalent of the small, insulting kid at school who mocks you while hiding behind his massive cousin.

FLAYER CAKE

Another dilemma quickly presents itself. Does our party risk potential death saving Shadowheart from her pod? The answer is yes, but only because she's awake and talking, and therefore capable of judging Flenk for abandoning her. If she was unconscious, Pillius would have strutted straight past without a second thought. It does raise another interesting RP question: is saving her worth annoying Lae'zel? The answer is yes, again, because

looking heroic is more important than avoiding interpersonal conflict. We're learning who Flenk is together. There's also something quite satisfying about choosing the most conniving way to resolve every conflict. Some might call it diplomacy. Others, manipulation. Either way, the opening ends with Flenk creeping to the nautiloid console while his colleagues do all the fighting, after one spectacularly ill-timed rendition of *The Power*. I can't be sure, but I think I saw the mind flayer dancing.

Flenk's first act after escaping the crashing ship is to try and steal the mysterious artefact from Shadowheart. Not because he's a thief, you understand, but more because she didn't want him to have it. It's more alarming proof that the



A meeting of flamboyant minds. Doublets for days.

Volo: Ah, my good friend!

➤ worst thing you can be in the company of Pillius Flenk is asleep. Soon after that, I pull a roguish wizard, Gale, from a rock. Flenk lies to him, quite obviously and pointlessly, about landing the nautiloid and saving the day. I decide that Flenk likes Gale. He's more fun than Shadowheart, with a similar line in garrulous bollocks. A bigger party also means more people to impress, which is ideal.

Flenk gets his first opportunity when we stumble across some ruffians guarding an abandoned chapel. I have no real compulsion to get inside but, during a normal playthrough, the very fact someone blocked my way would be reason enough to fight them. But I have to remind myself that Flenk will always take the path least likely to cause physical harm. This results in gloriously cheesy one-two in which Flenk convinces the guards that the nautiloid ship is an invasion force. They flee, then he uses his theatrical skills to fool another bandit into letting us inside. Part of me is delighted that Pillius used his skills to avoid a fight, and in doing so managed to impress Gale and Shadowheart. But I'm also worried that it was slightly too slick. A terrifying thought grips me: what if Flenk is actually good? There's a danger of him turning into a charming pacifist. If this was a movie, this would be the first nascent spark of humanity in Pillius. I feel like I need to mislead someone, and quickly. The game also rewards his nonsense: talking my way past the bandits aligns with Pillius' background as a Charlatan, and he feels Inspired, which is like rewarding a dog for pissing on your sofa.

LICH PICKINGS

It's impossible to navigate the chapel without some fighting, and at times combat is perilous enough that I wish I'd taken more time to find a fourth party member before entering, if only to have someone else to hide behind. Eventually, however, through a mix of hurling insults, magical laughter and playing inappropriate songs every time I have an action left over, we succeed. Best of all, Flenk finds an amulet that lets me talk to dead people, which offers vastly increased scope for impressing strangers, even if they are already dead.

We reach the first big location, Druid Grove, and the game opens up in a way that's almost intimidating. For a man whose primary purpose in life is making sure

SONGS IN THE KEY OF STRIFE

Pillius Flenk has a tune for every occasion

SING FOR ME

If in doubt, just assume people want you to sing for them.

BARD DANCE

Or 'cowering', as it's also known.

OLD TIME BATTLES

Ideally performed during a very current battle.

THE POWER

To inspire colleagues into protecting you.

THE QUEEN'S HIGH SEAS

Whenever you're near any body of water. Lake, ocean, puddle, whatever.

OF DIVINITY AND SIN

When you're stood near the portrait of Fane.



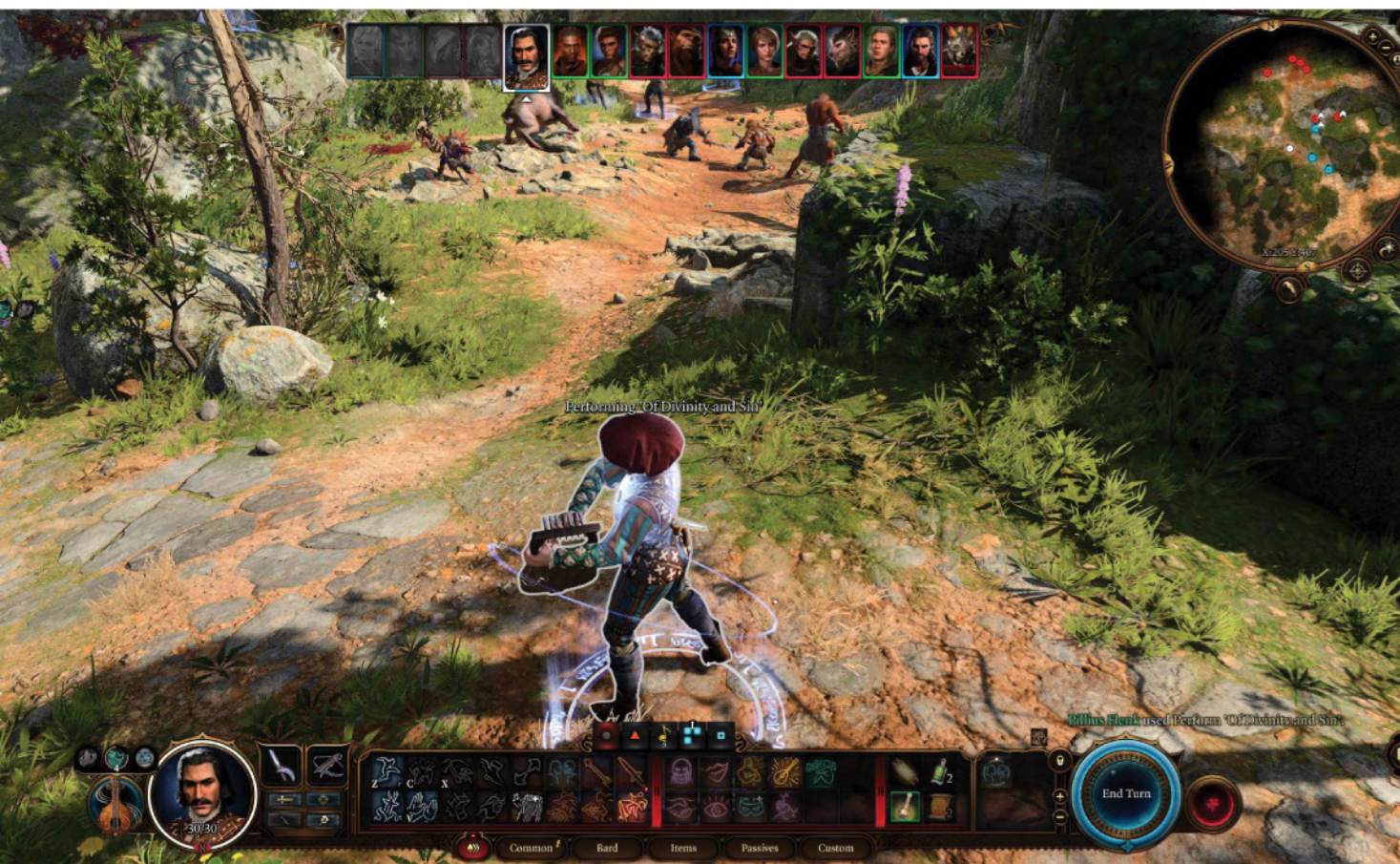
everyone is deeply impressed with him, this is a problem. Most peoples' goals here don't align. Flenk starts with the simple stuff, filling him with the false confidence that he can be everyone's friend. He lies to some children and tells them they'll be great at fighting, when in truth they have as much chance of survival as the last Garibaldi in an old people's home. And, yet again, we learn that Pillius' propensity of nonsense can be beneficial. This conversation leads us to recruiting Wyll, who I would otherwise almost certainly have missed. Flenk decides he doesn't especially like Wyll, because he uses his rapier with irritating elan, when actually it should only be used for desperately discouraging enemies who get too close to you. There are some more pleasing distractions in the camp – Flenk uses his sleight of hand skills to steal a ring from a thieving Tiefling child – then we're faced with a genuine moral dilemma.

BEAR NECESSITIES

As Pillius struts to the ritual site, he comes across a group of people arguing with the druids. Their young daughter, Arabella, attempted to steal a sacred idol and has been taken prisoner as punishment. This is an interesting proposition. Saving a doomed child would be an amazingly heroic thing to do. But there's a worrying chance that it'll actually involve fighting people who can turn into bears, which absolutely isn't Flenk's vibe. Nevertheless, armed with capable friends and a pathological desire to be loved, Pillius enters the druids' nucleus. Most of them seem rather reasonable. There are some fellow thespians inside: Alfira, a tiefling bard, whom I

BELOW: Flenk's greatest role so far: 'guy on the other side of the door'.





I HOPE THAT WE'LL MEET AGAIN LATER, ASSUMING THE DRUIDS DON'T KILL US ALL

desperately want to belittle but can't resist helping; and Volo, a flamboyant storyteller who's like looking in a bullshit mirror. Flenk uses all his bard powers to ingratiate himself to them both. I hope that we'll meet again later, assuming the druids don't kill us all.

The party meets Kagha, a fearsome druid leader who feels like Evanagline Lilly playing Margaret Thatcher. I don't know whether to attack her on sight or fall in love. In true *Baldur's Gate* style, Kagha is complex rather than outright evil, with her own specific motivations. At first, Flenk's job is simple: stop Kagha from menacing a tiny child. My path is clear. Using Flenk's apparently comprehensive bardic knowledge, I quote Silvanus and

convince Kagha to free the child. But it leads to a bigger dilemma. She intends to conduct a ritual that will wrap the grove in brambles, sealing the druids inside but killing the refugees that surround it. Flenk isn't morally prepared for this sort of decision. Saving the refugees would be the most heroic choice, but it's obviously rather dangerous. And killing Kagha doesn't seem like an option, either. We nearly lost a fight earlier against some reanimated writers – the weakest of all enemies – so it's unlikely we'd fare well against an enclave of literal bears. Thankfully, a third option presents itself. Kagha is only acting as the druids' leader because Halsin, their actual boss, has been imprisoned by goblins. So, at the risk of ending this diary like *Fellowship of the Ring*, Pillius Flenk's mission is clear. He will go to the goblin camp and rescue Halsin. Halsin will tell Kagha to stop being an ass. And the refugees will (probably) be saved. Once again, the more I get to know Pillius Flenk, the more creeping danger there is of him becoming good. But *Baldur's Gate III* is rich enough that there's every chance he'll do something awful instead. ■

ABOVE: Yes, we are in mortal peril. But there's always time for a song.



Wait till you see my 30-minute freeform lyre solo, Kagha.



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

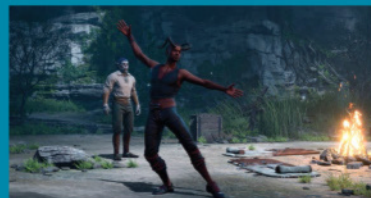
BALDUR'S GATE III'S DORKIEST COMPANION

Yes, I love Wyll, and I love to hate Wyll. *By Ted Litchfield*



LEFT: Everybody got mad at me and said this was a spoiler but it happens so early.

RIGHT: Whoa there, tiger.



I would say the most 'Wyll' moment I experienced in *Baldur's Gate III* was when I hit a big milestone in fan favourite tiefling barbarian Karlach's personal quest and she told me there'd be a first big romance scene the next time I rested at camp. Alright, hell yeah!

On slamming that Long Rest button though, I was greeted not by everybody's favourite devil lady, who I'd been pursuing to the exclusion of all the other companions, but instead a cutscene of my guy walking in on goddamn Wyll practising his ballroom dance moves alone. "Figured it was time to brush up on my skills," he told me with a grin. "I wouldn't want to fail my new partner." Oh brother!

With the patience of a saint, I humoured my 'I like you but not in that way' bud through the motions of that dance they do in like, *Pride and Prejudice*. It'd be a really sweet scene if Wyll was the sad sack demon boy for me, but in my playthrough, it took on a hilarious different context.

Once he started getting fresh, I let him down gently and he still had the temerity to act like a kicked puppy. *Baldur's Gate III* and Wyll perfectly simulated the experience of being on a Netflix date with someone and having their roommate wander in and be like, "Oh, I love this episode, mind if I join you guys?"

I believe Wyll is the paragon of 'the nice guy human male companion you find early in the game'. He is Carth Onasi-core, the grandson of all the Kaiden Alenkos you couldn't blow up on Virmire. I've always had a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 3, 2023

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

OUR REVIEW
97%

LINK
[baldursgate3.game](https://www.baldursgate3.game)

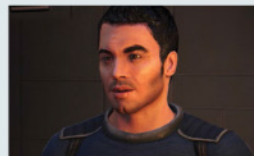
PAST WYLLS

The RPG lame-os of yesteryear



CARTH

Carth Onasi, you old space dog. Still hung up about your old boss?



KAIDAN

Kaidan is from Vancouver, gets headaches, and that's about it.



ALISTAIR

Now we're talking. I love this dork. BFFs for life.



JACOB

D-tier companion, and crunches aren't even a good core exercise!

fondness for this RPG archetype, because, if I'm being honest, I probably am one. There are way more Jacob Taylors out there in the world than Thane Krioses.

This type of guy often gets put down by RPG fans, "Kaiden Alenko is boring, I'd rather hang out with

which the spicy deli meats of the rest of your party must lay. Every comedy duo needs a straight man, and every centuries-old dinosaur bounty hunter needs a guy from Vancouver who gets migraines to contrast with.

HE'S A DOOFUS

What really sets Wyll over the top for me is how much Larian leaned into him being a massive putz, and also kind of a fraud. Wyll's not just a Neutral Good Human Fighter, he's a Neutral Good Human Warlock, one who traded his immortal soul for Eldritch Blasts (jury's still out on that deal).

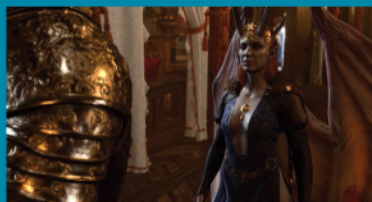
But isn't that kind of relatable on its own? What would you give up to have super powers? I know Wyll has this tragic backstory and his hand was forced into becoming The Blade of Frontiers, but he's loving this shit. Wyll gets a kick out of brandishing his rapier all, "En garde, my liege, you face the Blade of Frontiers," then telling a Tiefling kid that, actually, the real hero was on the inside all along. All of this goofy comic-book Dudley Do-Right stuff while he's beholden to an infernal bureaucracy of eternal torment for his powers.

When you first meet Wyll, he's all in a lather to kill Karlach because his Nine Hells Gig Economy boss told him to, no details. If it came down to you or her, buddy, I know who I'm picking. I wasn't even the first party member he made a pass at: in exploration dialogue, he'll shoot his shot with Lae'zel, then Shadowheart (sometimes back to back), and only then does he try to pull the whole ballroom dance routine with me.

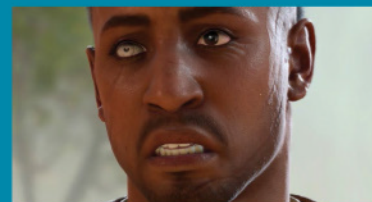
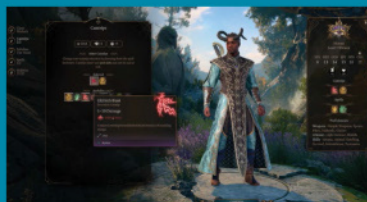
But isn't all that failure and embarrassment so relatable and memorable? Wyll's like a Venture Bros character transplanted into *Baldur's Gate III*. He might not get all the fan cams or inspire a Tumblr blog following like Karlach or Astarion, but I love my goofy devil boy bud all the same, and you should too. ■

I LET HIM DOWN GENTLY AND HE STILL HAD THE TEMERITY TO ACT LIKE A KICKED PUPPY

JROTC reject Ashley Williams," they insist. "Carth whines too much, he needs to get over his dead wife and annoying son," they go on. Before ever booting up *Dragon Age: Origins* for myself, I distinctly remember Game Informer magazine awarding Alistair some kind of 'Dork of the Year 2009' award. Enough. These brave men have a critical mission. They are the sturdy white bread on



RIGHT: He's actually pretty strong in a fight thanks to those Warlock powers.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

It's a normal sunny day in a Xeroxed house in a Xeroxed neighbourhood

As cool as seeing a nuke go off is, there's no way anyone would've survived this.



FALLOUT 4

Revisiting Bethesda's strangest opening sequence. *By Tyler Colp*

A staggering eight years ago, *Fallout 4* was released. Its developer, Bethesda, made the swap back to the rusty post-apocalypse after having launched what would become one of the most influential open-world RPGs of all time, *Skyrim*, just three years before. In many ways, *Fallout 4* is a sequel to both *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3*. It refines the expansive structure of the fantasy setting by rooting it in the familiar, real-world locations of the ruined American setting. And it begins before the bombs are dropped, in an intro sequence that whiffs an attempt to ground your character in its fascinating world.

You're already awake and staring at the bathroom mirror in the first ten minutes of *Fallout 4*. This comes

immediately after a narrated autobiography of Nate, *Fallout 4*'s male protagonist and the husband of Nora, the female protagonist. You can sculpt their faces into whatever shape you'd like and then step out of the bathroom into a house so idyllic it would be invisible in *Fallout 3*'s parody of 1950s suburban life in its Tranquility Lane mission.

Time freezes as you preemptively train your scavenger brain by searching each room for objects to interact with. Cereal boxes, Nuka Cola, and your own infant son are prompts for your character to reflect on the mundanity of living comfortably and ignorantly in a country whose leaders were secretly preparing for nuclear catastrophe.

QUIET INTRO

Fallout 4's quiet intro plays everything rather straight for

the fourth entry in a series about the hubris of America. It's playful in a way videogame tutorials often are – go this way, touch that, follow me. You need to become a parent in the next 20 minutes and that means you're going to have to look at a baby a few times. Look at Shaun, all bundled up in his crib. Tap the mobile to stop him from crying and don't perceive the irony of being trapped in a house full of playthings to keep you, the player, from crying. If you finished *Fallout 4*, you know why all of this is here and why this fails as a reasonable origin story for the super soldier you eventually become.

To Nora, it's a normal sunny day in a Xeroxed house in a Xeroxed neighbourhood. She's a lawyer and he's a war veteran, and they both are conveniently situated in the safest bubble of America. *Fallout 4* celebrates the nuclear family so that when it's obliterated, it can argue that something was lost. But *Fallout 4*



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 11, 2015

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
beth.games/3YMV180



Being cryogenically frozen is a horrifying experience.



goes so far as to include a lesbian couple as your neighbours and a handful of Black families, too, the sort of people who might've already lost a lot more than you.

When I passed by them as I replayed *Fallout 4*'s intro, they were frightened more than I was. My

family had just been told that, because of Nate's service to the country, we would have a place in the local Vault-Tec Vault should the war against China spread into our borders. Other than the panic of armed police hurriedly ushering us toward the vault, my family fit

perfectly into the part of America worth preserving. The first few minutes of *Fallout 4* hit much differently when you live in a global pandemic where governmental hospitality and policies prioritise a certain type of citizen over others.

Instead, *Fallout 4*'s imagination is surprisingly small for a starting experience set in the nostalgic era the series has lambasted for decades. It's entirely possible that Bethesda meant for you to read all of this as a caricature of 1950s American life. It is that, but I'm not sure it makes a clear argument that you shouldn't enjoy it and mourn it when it's suddenly buried in atomic clouds. The only bit of scepticism comes from a dialogue choice in a conversation with the Vault-Tec employee who warns you of a possible apocalypse. You can make a joke about the likelihood of the end of the world two minutes before it happens.

VAULT CHECK

Unsealing PCG's thoughts on *Fallout 4*

“

Bethesda's *Fallout* games are primarily about the atmosphere of the world at large, and *Fallout 4* is no different.

Phil Savage

“

Bethesda RPGs have always given players ample room to ignore the official narrative and create their own characters, histories, motivations, and stories, and *Fallout 4* is no exception.

Chris Livingston

“

[*Fallout 4* is] full of a new story, new characters, and plenty of other things to keep you busy, but if you were hoping for a graphical upgrade, Bethesda apparently isn't interested in such things.

Jarred Walton

“

It's more like an FPS than an RPG: a series of rooms linked with corridors, filled with enemies waiting patiently for you to kill them.

Andy Kelly



LET ME OUT

After the bombs go off as you take the elevator deep underground into the vault, the real *Fallout* begins. The familiar titanium walls and uniformed Vault-Tec employees welcome you to a future you know won't last. Other fortunate families



ABOVE: This board game's title isn't on the nose at all.

RIGHT: Take a break from this traumatic event and try to get a high score.



There he is, our future primary antagonist.



panic as the guards push you down the line toward the cryo tanks where you'll spend the next 200-ish years.

Your entry into Vault 111 emulates the unease of going through airport security. You stumble along trying to avoid trouble while too scared to ask why any of this is necessary. The specificity of this anxiety in a scenario where your character's life affords zero benefits, is the sharpest part of *Fallout 4*'s opening hour. It's frightening to be treated like a number and worse when you're given the blue and yellow jumpsuit to fully become one.

Plot happens and you're left husband- and baby-less in an empty vault. Mostly empty – the radroaches took over when the people revolted. Discarded skeletons lay on the metal floors as you run past and the place you were told would be safe is now an obstacle on your path to avenge your spouse – an instantaneous decision only a videogame protagonist could make. You find a pistol and use it to dispatch the roaches with one of *Fallout 4*'s most controversial changes from the previous game: a higher level of baseline firearm proficiency no matter what kind of character you choose to be. For a lawyer, Nora sure

THE PLACE YOU WERE TOLD WOULD BE SAFE IS NOW AN OBSTACLE IN YOUR PATH

can aim, and it jerks you right out of what could have been a frantic, desperate escape (something that makes more sense if you choose to play as Nate). The horror of reading logs about the people who were trapped here for months wondering if the government would ever let them out, or if there is anything left to be let out to, fades when you've got a gun in your hands.

There's no avoiding that this is an FPS where the shooting should be satisfying, but for all the effort to lock you in a maze with cheese at the end, *Fallout 4*'s ambitions crumble a little early. So much work goes into establishing your character as wilfully ignorant of the war outside their door and instead of reacting to the death of their loved one with shocked horror, they transform into Rambo.

This is where Bethesda seems to struggle the most. Its worlds are stuffed with stunning landmarks, eccentric characters and satisfying carnage, but the emotional journey of

its characters, especially that of the protagonist's, are on 2x speed. I'd be willing to cut it some slack given the inherent absurdity of the setting if the writing or systems slowed down a bit and gave you time to respond to what is a pretty fascinating premise.

DETAILED WORLDS

I like a fair amount of the rest of *Fallout 4*, and am aware that many Bethesda game intros fail to capture the actual draw of the experience. But millions of people just played *Elden Ring*, an RPG that also opens in a sealed-off area that acts more as a thesis underlining the mood of the world rather than offering a bunch of convoluted reasons why you should care about it.

With *Starfield* now out, and suffering from another flat, compromised intro, I'd love to see Bethesda transfer some of the mastery it has with building massive, detailed worlds into an intro for its next game that confidently anchors me to its fiction. An intro that pulls in everything it's learned from its past games and modern culture. However, even if *Fallout 4*'s intro falls flat, the ambition behind it is more than enough to create an opener that I won't forget. ■

JODY
MACGREGOR

I woke up with my face in a plate of synth-spaghetti this morning. The sky was the colour of a TV tuned to a dead channel: blue.

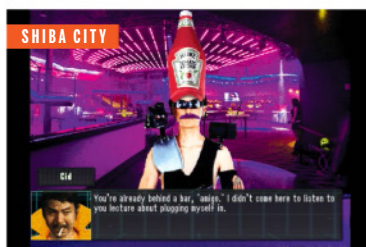


PUNK IN DRUBLIC

SHADOWRUN DRAGONFALL

paradoxinteractive.com/games/shadowrun-dragonfall-directors-cut

→ My mercenary crew includes a shaman – the *Shadowrun* RPGs mix cyberpunk with fantasy – who used to be in a punk band. So I ask if he can sing. “I was the front man for a punk band, boss,” he replies, as if I’m an idiot. “Fuck no, I can’t sing.”



SHIBA CITY

DOG OF DRACULA 2

gamejolt.com/games/dog-of-dracula-2/15131

→ Once upon a time, as a pet groomer for the undead, you befriended a vampire hound. Now, in the cybertimes, your dog’s half-robot and you’re just another Nuevo Tokyo loser. *Dog of Dracula 2* is a parody of cyberpunk’s hard-boiled edge so sharp you could shave a spitz with it.



HACK SEAT DRIVER

NEO CAB

neocabgame.com

→ An anthology of character-led short stories about weirdos, including a cultist and a girl whose parents trap her in power armour for her own protection. Each of them returns, night after night, to spill their guts in the back of your cab as you cruise through darkened streets.



BARS & STRIPES

THE RED STRINGS CLUB

deconstructeam.com

→ Bartender Donovan teases information out of his patrons, hacker Brandeis tricks people over the phone and android Akara-184 manipulates emotions by crafting cybernetic implants. Though each is mechanically different, *The Red Strings Club* is focused on dialogue.



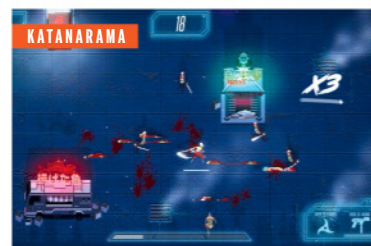
MUST



PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Jody Macgregor

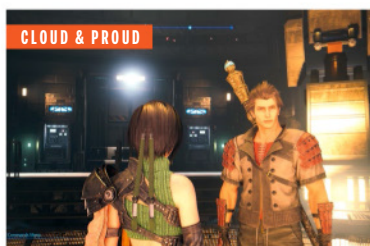


KATANARAMA

AKANE

ludic-studios.com/akane

→ *Akane* is a one-hit-kill arena battle where every single member of the yakuza wants you dead and you’ve got a katana, a gun and upgradeable cigarettes. A typical game lasts minutes if you’re lucky, but you’ll keep trying again and again to see if you can survive a little longer.



CLOUD & PROUD

FINAL FANTASY VII
REMAKE INTERGRADE

ffvii-remake-intergrade.square-enix-games.com

→ The remake focuses on the best part of *FFVII*: the grim futuristic city of Midgar, where the slums are stuck in the shadow of the rich above. There’s a lot of heart in its depiction of poverty, and the ecoterrorists who become the unlikely heroes.



NEURODANCER

RUINER

ruinergame.com

→ A top-down shooter where time slows when you grab a fallen weapon, adding rhythm to its dance. Dash and bash with your metal pipe, grab someone’s chaingun, unload it on another gangster, yank their blade and go again – a kinetic push-pull of fast and slow that’s also stylish as heck.



BLADE ROLLER

CITIZEN SLEEPER

fellowtraveller.games/citizen-sleeper

→ You’re an escaped worker made of synthmeat, but you’ve still gotta eat. A pool of dice represents your ability to face each day-cycle, and can be spent to explore, work and hack. You’ll befriend unlikely allies too, and getting to know them is as important as struggling to survive.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

PC GAMER TOWERS UPGRADE LIST 2023

We've got some ambitious plans

BIGGER HARDWARE LAB

Dave James has now not been seen for five weeks, with the entranceway to the PCG hardware lab totally blocked up with excess cases, monitors, gaming chairs and rig components, preventing access. We really must get security to check for vital signs.

HELIPAD, PLEASE

The PC Gamer Transit System is definitely now a liability for guests. This year alone we've had to rescue Swen Winke and Warren Spector from giant irradiated tunnel rats after tube breakdowns. Thank goodness John Romero was on hand with his double-barrelled super shotgun.

CAT POD RENOVATION

Have you seen the state of the PC Gamer cat's sleeping pod? Editor Rob is responsible for the numerous curry stains and spilled beer (which is why the cat smells strongly of lamb bhuna), but despite that, an upgrade is well overdue. An automatic Lick-e-lix dispenser has been requested.

BETTER LIGHTING IN THE PC GAMER MAG ARCHIVE

Have you been down there recently? Honestly, it's like navigating the Mines of Moria. How did health and safety clear using fiery wall sconces to illuminate the highly flammable mag stacks? I suggest, once we've freed Dave, all his spare RGB lighting should be used to replace it forthwith.

SCUMM BAR RE-PAINT

OK, I know we all like the cosy, ramshackle vibe of the PC Gamer Towers drinking hole, but it hasn't been redecorated since 1993. A fresh coat of paint (in the PC Gamer colours) and some new chairs have been requested. The life-size Gordon Freeman cutout can stay, repeat, stay.

...UNTIL NOV 9



CRUNCHING
KOALAS



Looking forward to see more.

THE SIXTH AXIS

The Gap is one to look out for.

MOVIES GAMES AND TECH



It's seriously clever stuff.

GOD IS A GEEK

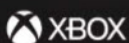
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